

Betrothed

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Summary: The sacred ring was destroyed, yet the war rages on. Blood stains the dirt of every planet, but neither species is winning. Every option has been used, and both races are crumbling because of it. Only one thing can save them now. A betrothal.

Arbiter/OC.

1. Last Chance

_**AN1:** Welcome to "Betrothed"! This is my first Halo fic, so bear with me. I'm mostly into Phantom of the Opera, so this is bound to have some romantic junk in here sometime. It is, though, going to be angsty and, hopefully, funny (I try, at least.). I'm not too familiar with the characters, as I just beat Halo 1 & 2 recently (and only once), so any constructive criticism and information would be WONDERFUL. But, please, no flames. Also, I'm currently writing 2 other fics that I must keep updated, so this story is NOT top priority. In other words, don't expect quick updates, unless I have artistic inspiration...or something. _

_Well, I really hope you guys like this. _

Oh, and please REVIEW!

_ - Kodu_

Disclaimer: I don't own Halo. Duh.

AN2 (04/07/09): Ah, alas! I come crawling back. Many of your wonderful reviews have inspired me to dabble more in this story (I've still gotten some, years later!), and so now I'm turning my attention once again to good 'ole Arby/Human fic. At the moment, I'm going through these beginning two chapters to get re-acquainted with the story, and to edit any previous mistakes or inconsistencies. It's been, what, a little over three years since I've last updated? Ah... yeah. Sorry about that! I got sucked into an entirely different

fandom, though I'm sure most of you know how that goes...

Excessive amounts of tl;dr aside (That's 'too long; didn't read' for those of you who don't already know.), I do hope any new readers find this story intriguing, and if any old ones still remain, I hope you'll be pleased with my changed writing style. I like to think I've gotten better.... Not sure, we'll see.

Anyways! Here's to old times! Huzzah!

- Kodu

* * *

><p>1</p>

Last Chance

—

Feet were dragging against the ground.

Two hairy arms held the being up.

Darkness, foggy recognition, then darkness once again.

Shouts from all around the room.

Shouting, shouting.

High pitched screams.

Oh, how they hurt!

Words, they are shouting words.

No, not words.

One word.

A single word.

Chanting over and over.

Her-e-tic.

Her-e-tic.

Her-e-tic.

Restraints that shocked.

They burn painfully.

I pity the creature in pain.

I pity.

I am the creature in pain.

I am.

Another burn, on my chest.

It hurts; I fear I cannot go on.

But I will not shout out.

I will not let them celebrate in my weakness.

I will not!

_Will...will...n-not....

The Arbiter awoke, tossing the silky smooth sheets from his bed and flinging his legs over the side. One large, clawed hand pressed against his forehead to wipe away the sweat dripping down his alien brow. _Three years, _he thought bitterly to himself, clicking his mandibles together in frustration. _Three years since that day, and yet I still have nightmares._ A sigh - if it could be called that, as it sounded more like a choking gargle - escaped the Elite's mouth. He threw his hand from his forehead and slammed it, fist clenched, against the bed.

The small, military-style cot groaned in protest as the extra weight came down upon it. Three plastic-like poles holding it up creaked then cracked, collapsing against the hard, shiny white floor.

A string of Covenant curses flew out of his mouth before the Elite picked himself up, throwing the remaining half of the cot still standing to the floor.

Just my luck, he thought, snorting; then, speaking aloud, "I may be the Arbiter, but I am still a heretic."

The word 'heretic' died with a choking sound in his throat as he fought to control the rebellious sobs attempting to escape his mouth.

And heretics do not have the luxury of stable beds.

The Elite stumbled over towards a closet and swung the shining metal doors open. He coughed, then straightened up, striding down the rows of armor like the commander he was.

Was.

A truer word had never been spoken.

He used to be great.

He used to be revered.

But all that had changed after his failure.

He had lost in the battle to protect the most sacred ring, Halo. A single soldier had stood in his way. A man - no, not man, for he was strong as men are weak - but a wraith - yes, a fighting machine bread for warfare - had single-handedly destroyed the Covenant's religious

symbol.

Stopping at a small alcove in the wall, the Arbiter began sorting through the shelves and shelves of differently decorated helmets, passing over the well-worn battlefield headgear for newer models suitable for his task.

Today he was meeting with the Prophets.

It had been three years to the day since he had last seen them.

Since he had been granted the status of Arbiter.

Since he had accepted the suicidal role not offered, but forced upon him.

And he wanted to look good for this meeting.

The Elite's claws rested lightly over one of the helmets as he studied it carefully.

It was ebony black with wisps of gold and silver around the eye holes. An elaborate symbol was painted across the brow in differing shades of the same two colors, thin lines winding around each other to form something roughly the shape of a spiked flower, though it would be more accurate to say it was a star on the point of explosion. It was an ancient symbol of an ancient race long lost through the threads of time and history, which meant 'Proud'.

"Frivolous decorations," he mumbled to himself while studying the intricate work of art. It was functional, in the very least, the blackened shade making it easy to lurk in the shadows without detection. A bit pointless, though. The only lasting art left was that painted with spattered blood.

It was regal in a traditional sense, and would suit his purposes nicely, so his donned the armor and worked the material to fit comfortably over his head.

The back of the helmet fanned out to cover the Elite's neck in black sheets of sghorri. The super-fine material was pliable like clay, yet tough like armor. When handled lightly you could fold and bend it to suit your needs, but when substantial force or speed is applied to it - say, a bullet from a gun - it will harden and deflect like any proper metal.

Two golden spikes, hard as bone, ran from the base of the helmet's neck to the top of the alien's head, gradually spreading out the higher they went, until it looked like two menacing horns protruded from the Elite's forehead, pointed at whomever he faced at the moment. Along the "bone" on the neck were black and silver daggers, curved towards his back.

The thin armor covering his four-part mouth had golden spikes attached to their tips, making it look like he had fangs.

With a grim smile, the Arbiter snapped his headgear into place, looking all the more terrifying than before.

Continuing on, he came across a few shelves with various weaponry ranging from plasma grenades to plasma rifles, and even a shotgun he had stolen from the enemy and disassembled for study.

Finally, he came to a rack stored with multiple styles of armor, all the various types such as breastplates, shields, wrist guards, arm guards, etc., stacked together in a matching set.

The Elite sorted through a few choices before selecting what would best match his helmet. They were, coincidentally, designed to be in a set, so both headgear and armor worked perfectly together.

He snapped on the breastplate first; jet black which could easily cloak him in darkness and the symbol from his brow set directly over the heart. Next came the metal coverings for his thighs and legs - all black except for a tinge of gold around the edges - and silver and gold shoulder plates which spread out to all black armor for the arms.

The Arbiter stepped out of the small armory of his closet and walked over towards a mirror on the far side of the room, surveying himself. His polished armor gleamed like a shining star, except for the underlying danger of the black behind that light.

He looked both powerful and menacing.

It suited him well.

A knock sounded on his door and the growl of a fellow Elite woke him from his reverie.

"The Prophets shall see you now," the gruff voice spat out, the heavy thud of his footsteps receding down the passageway outside.

Sighing, the Arbiter turned once more to his reflection and adjusted his armor.

"Today I either die, or fight. Either way, I fall with my pride."

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"Sonya, get your ass back here!"

"Sir, yes sir."

Sonya smirked sarcastically, giving a mock-bow towards the soldier who had addressed her.

"And that's 'Miss Dabel' to you, Jonathan." she said as an afterthought, stressing his name in the hopes of annoying him.

"Listen to me, woman!" he said, gripping onto her shoulders and shaking her slightly. "You will not have this lip towards the

Master Chief when he arrives, do you hear me?"

Shrugging off his hands, the young soldier backed away to get a better look of his face, her eyes very stern. "And you listen to me. I will not go around entertaining these glory-hogging 'war heroes' with the gift of my politeness. I'll act accordingly to those I respect, and if he's like the last man who ca—"

"Oh, not him again," Jonathan cried out, clamping his hands over his ears.

Sonya's amber eyes glinted in fury as she took a few steps towards her fellow soldier.

"He made a move on me, Jonathan. He tried to get me in bed! I had to do something!"

"Yeah, like complaining to a commanding officer," he retorted sharply. "Not punching one of the most esteemed captains in the face! You know he could have killed you if I hadn't gotten there in time!"

"Yeah, well he would've done worse if I hadn't done anything," she spat venomously.

They both sobered, looking away from each other and fixing their eyes on anything but the person in front of them.

"Just..." Jonathan began, but his words died off.

"Don't worry," the girl said, turning around and smiling at her friend grimly. "I won't do anything."

With a curt nod and a steely gaze, the soldier marched off, leaving Sonya to watch his back as he left. When he was out of site, she turned on her heel and strode towards her sleeping quarters, feeling heavily exhausted after their argument.

Sonya was a soldier on the ship War Monger. More accurately, she was the only female soldier on the spacecraft, or the entire squadron, for that matter. She wasn't anything that special, which was the reason she was sent to this particular ship. Her fighting abilities were mediocre, her strength average for a woman, but her intelligence and sharp-mindedness surpassed any of the highest ranking officers.

Sonya had a level-headed mind, most usually. She had been on the battlefield a few times, but mainly just stayed on the ship, sorting through or handing out weapons in the armory.

Standing in front of her bathroom mirror, Sonya picked up a comb and began brushing through the frizzy tangles that were her hair. Waves of light brown fell just below her shoulders as she released the mess from the tight bun it had been in.

Attacking the unruly strands with a comb, the soldier soon had the situation under control.

Slipping out of her camouflage uniform and into some flannel night clothes, the girl fell onto her cot-like bed, her eyes heavy with

sleep.

But sleep would not come.

"Soldier Dable, you're immediate presence is requested on the bridge. The Captain wants to see you, and Master Chief will be here soon."

The voice died away as Sonya hurled a pillow at the closed door.

"Why me?" she grumbled, already half asleep. Going to her closet, she took out a fresh uniform just like the one she had carelessly thrown on the floor. After hastily tossing it on, she jumped out the door and made her way towards her destination at a half-running, half-jogging pace.

Flying past shining white halls and corridors, the soldier raced through the maze-like stronghold with practiced ease. It took her several minutes, as her room was on the opposite end of the station, but she finally reached the bridge, just in time to see a green-armored giant step through the sliding double doors and make its way towards her captain.

She burst through the doors and looked around.

Several heads sitting in front of blinking, winking, shining, beeping screens turned as she entered. These were dressed in all white, differing in rank by blue or red stripes along their left or right arms.

There were three levels to the room. The top level held the controls for weaponry, the middle for defense, and the bottom for maneuvering.

In the center of the bottom level stood a large, high-backed chair shaped sort of like a cylindrical tube blasted open on one side and smoothed along the edges. Or, better yet, one of those long pills doctors give to a person who can barely swallow their own spit without regurgitating it back up, but expect them to take the giant horse pill to 'make them better' anyways.

Surrounding the 'pill chair' were blue blinking lights, and to the left and right were two metal consoles that jutted out of the floor; various buttons of all types adorning the otherwise 'tabletop' surfaces.

The chair was elevated, sitting atop a gradually sloping hill of metal, and had a giant view screen in front of it.

Standing in front of the chair was the green giant. Having a better look, Sonya could tell he was of humanoid form and had a golden shade - much like the color of her eyes - over where his face might be.

Standing before him - and at a much smaller height - was a sharp looking man with large gray eyes and a hooked nose. Lines of age were scattered around his forehead, cheeks, and chin, and his white-and-gray hair did little to improve his appearance.

He wore a white navy-style uniform with mounds and mounds of pins and pendants, awards and medals, sticking out of his chest.

He was fairly tall and had wonderful posture for his fifty-odd years of age.

Those hawk eyes of his landed on Sonya as soon as she appeared, silently telling her to 'Get her ass over there,' which would be the second time someone had mentioned her derriere that day.

Obeying the command, she swiftly marched towards the captain and the giant, giving both a salute, then turning towards the white-haired man once again.

"You asked for me, sir?"

Nodding curtly, he answered: "At ease, soldier. And, yes."

Her shoulders instantly went slack and she stood in a more comfortable stance, waiting for him to continue.

"This, Miss Dable, is Master Chief. Master Chief, Miss Dable."

The giant turned his visor in her direction and stared for a few moments - apparently analyzing something - then turned towards the captain again.

"Dable?" he spoke, his voice metallic sounding, and slightly gravelly.

There was another pause, then he nodded. "Sonya Dable, Soldier 347 on the War Monger. Twenty-two years of age, 109 pounds. One living relative, an uncle by the name of Jonas Dable. Parents died in a Covenant attack two years ago. Female. Single. Has been working for the UNSC since March 12, two days after her family's death."

"H-how did yo-" the soldier began, but was cut off from Master Chief.

"Thanks Cortana."

"Welcome, Chief," replied a computerized female voice; Cortana, apparently.

Turning towards the captain, Sonya stared up at him in confusion.

"With all due respect sir, but why am I here? And why does he-"

"Know so much about you?" the captain said, cutting her off. "You can thank Cortana for that last part. And, come, walk with us. We have something very...important to tell you."

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"Great Prophets, I am humbled by your request for me."

The Arbiter knelt before the three most sacred beings of the Covenant, one slender arm resting lightly against his propped up leg; his head bowed in submission to the three creatures in front of him.

"Rise," one spoke, it's voice aged, yet clear.

Following the command, the Elite tensed his well-toned leg muscles and pushed lightly off the floor, standing stock-still and awaiting his next orders.

Nothing was said for a few moments as one of the Prophets - Regret - waved away the two Brute guards who had been standing just inside the door.

As the purple-pink entrance swished closed with a click, the meeting began.

"Do you know why we have brought you here?" asked Truth, head slightly cocked to the side.

"No, Great One. I was told only to see you, nothing more."

"Good," broke in Mercy, turning towards the other two Prophets and conversing with them quietly for a moment. After their whispers resided, all three turned once more towards the Elite.

"Arbiter, you have seen first-hand what this battle with the inferior humans is doing to our precious people," Mercy spoke, studying his reaction to every piece of information they gave him.

"The humans are adapting," continued Truth with a serious look on his face. "Something we certainly did not expect. The Covenant..."

"...is losing morale," interjected Regret. "This war has lasted many years, and since the fall of the Holy Ring-

At this all three looked down upon the Elite with great disdain and disappointment.

"- they have rapidly begun loosing hope," he finished.

There was another slight pause, in which the Arbiter spoke out with a rough, throaty reply:

"How do we solve this?"

All three looked at him for a moment, then burst out in shocking laughter. The laugh was harsh and gravelly; the Covenant alien took an immediate dislike to the sound.

"My son, we cannot solve this problem!" The Elite couldn't tell which one had spoken, but he was confused by the words.

"Then how do we win? I fear I do not understand, Great Ones."

They quieted until the room was once again filled with dead

silence.

"We cannot win," whispered Truth, his words a broken echo throughout the cavernous hall.

"For two years," Regret instantly began to explain, "our forces have been in a deadlock with the humans. They are isolated to a small part of the universe as we scout and patrol the area around them, destroying anything that attempts to escape from their trap. We left them on several uninhabitable planets - some of those desolate rocks dying, others already dead. The plan was ideal at first: starve the humans out."

"But things got more complicated," continued Mercy. "They adapted to their surroundings, began to grow food and thrive amongst the decomposing planets. They can survive for a long time in that small universe. They would not be starving any time soon."

Truth broke in: "We have tried many times to break through their stronghold and destroy their means of survival, but each mission had failed. Yes, we have eliminated a number of their defensive troops, but have yet to completely take out their main food source. It is too deep into their base and too heavily guarded to even attempt an attack."

"The many failures," whispered Mercy, making the Arbiter strain to hear his words. "Have decimated our army's morale. They have no more confidence, Arbiter. They have no more hope."

"Fortunately," Regret picked up again. "The humans have had as much success as we in offensive maneuvers. Every time they try to push further out, we force them back into their little prison. As you can see, therefore, this war could take many years."

"_Many _years, Arbiter," spoke Truth. "_You're _children could be fighting against _their _children in a battle continuing years from now."

"What is to be done?" the Elite choked out, the seemingly impossible news that the Covenant was losing taking a toll on his emotions.

"Done, Arbiter?" barked Regret venomously. "The only option left. We attempt to make peace with the humans."

"Peace?" the Arbiter spoke incredulously. Then, realizing just who it was he was speaking to, replied more calmly.

"Even if we can send a transmission the humans will genuinely consider, how are we to agree to peace? Our ways...we are not like them and they are not like us. How could...how could this work? No peace treaty could possibly undo all the casualties we have already caused them, and they us, for that matter."

"You are a warrior," snapped Truth. "Rather, a heretic traitor! These are not your concerns, nor should they be."

Calming down, he slit his eyes and stared at the Elite. "Besides, we _have _made contact, we _have _designed a treaty, and they _have _agreed to it."

Another long pause, this time the silence seemed to cut into the Arbiter like a knife. So many questions raced through his mind that he couldn't string one sentence together before jumping to another one.

The only smart thing he did after that point was keep his mouth clamped shut.

"You question our authority?" they all spoke at once.

He shook his head 'no' vigorously.

"But you still wonder how we did it?"

A nod of the head confirmed a 'yes'.

Regret smiled slyly, leaning in towards the Elite; the Arbiter, in turn, leaning closer to hear what he had to say.

"A betrothal."

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"Yes, sir?" Sonya questioned as the door to the bridge slid shut and the party - wiry old man, huge green giant, and fiery young female - slowly made their way to a more desolate place on the War Monger: the visitors lounge.

The soldier could have rolled her eyes at the men who built that particular section of the ship. Like a war vessel would ever have visitors.

The room consisted of a vending machine filled with out of date snacks, two pots of withered plants, and four couches - two so stuffed you seemed to stand three inches higher when you sat down, and two so flat the middle of the couch ate a body whole.

Everyone decided to stand.

"Soldier," the captain began. "What I have to tell you is classified information. You cannot speak a word of it until the end of this week, when it will be publicly announced."

"Sir yes sir."

"Do you understand me, soldier? You have three days until you can mention this to anyone."

Confused at his repetition and strong emotion, Sonya merely nodded.

"Good," the old man sighed, his shoulders going slack for a fraction of a second before standing at attention once again.

"We have made contact with the Covenant."

"...Sir? I thought it was against orders to send a message out- "

He raised a hand to cut her off.

"Rather," the captain corrected himself, his steely gray eyes boring down upon her bright amber ones. "_They _made contact with _us_. "

More baffled by the minute, the soldier replied with one simple question.

"Sir?"

"They had something very... interesting to say, too."

Eying her for a reaction, he continued on.

"They proposed a plan for peace."

"Peace!"

But he once again snapped up his hand, forcing Sonya to keep the thousands of questions, doubts, and opinions locked up inside her mind.

"And we accepted."

That was the last straw. She couldn't keep quite anymore.

"Sir, how? I don't - How could we - They just..." Panting for breath, she cleared her throat and strained with all her might to get a single sentence out.

"H-how did we...agree with their...plan for...peace?" she said slowly and deliberately.

"They gave us an offer we couldn't refuse. Free reign over what universe we have, had, and could possibly colonize, excluding their own territories. We can approach them, and they've given us their permission to study their ships and technology."

Her mouth dropped open, eyes wide in disbelief. Shaking her head, Sonya straightened up and closed her gaping jaw.

"What's the catch?" she answered, her voice laced with suspicion.

And her suspicion was rightly placed.

The captain looked down at his feet, the first time he had broken eye contact with the girl since the conversation had started. Master Chief, also had turned his head, the side of the helmet glinting off the dim lights above.

"The catch..." The old man looked up again, his face void of emotion. "The catch is, they want to unite our kinds, human and Covenant. They want a betrothal."

"B-be..."

"A peace treaty would not suffice, Sonya. The only way we or they could amend the actions took was to unite our species in blood. And the only way to do that is to marry into each other."

The words sounded wrong even to his ears, but it had to be done. He would not lose another soldier when the end of the war could be so close at hand. One simple matter, and everyone would be happy.

"H-how could you do this!"

Both men were taken aback by her sudden outburst of emotion.

"Did you ever stop to consider what you're doing to the poor civilian who's to be married to this - this monster!"

"No civilian," spoke Master Chief in his gravel tones. "A soldier."

"Soldier! Even worse! You'd make someone who has sacrificed their life to protect the people from the Covenant to _marry _and _live with_ the very monster they were trying to destroy!"

"Soldier, stand down. This is neither the time nor the place for your lip," snapped the captain harshly.

Sighing, Sonya lowered her hands that had somehow gotten raised during the conversation, and slumped her shoulders forward.

"So...who's the 'lucky' soldier?" She put a sarcastic emphasis on the word 'lucky', making sure her frustration was very evident.

Looking from each other, to the girl, back to each other, the captain and Master Chief rested their eyes on her and let out a long sigh before the white-haired man answered.

"You."

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"W-what?" The Arbiter stuttered, taking two unsteady steps backwards.

"You heard us," snapped Mercy, looking agitated at his incompetence. "There is to be a betrothal between our race and the human monkeys." It was apparent that this particular Prophet thought the act disgusting by the way he grimaced while saying 'betrothal'.

"It was the only way," answered Truth more calmly.

Shaking his head slightly, the Elite glanced from Prophet to Prophet, his dark black eyes filled to the brim with incredulity and suspicion.

"And why are you telling me this?"

Regret smirked sadistically and opened his mouth to speak, when Mercy interrupted him.

"Our Arbiter has the right to know these things. No others shall be permitted this knowledge until the appropriate time."

It was obvious by his wording that the Prophet expected the Elite to keep this information a secret, on pane of death, until they announced it themselves.

Regret glared daggers towards Mercy and gave a sound close to a snort. Tapping the side of his throne with impatient fingers, he voiced his opinion to his fellow Prophet.

"Idiot. Do not dance around this subject."

"I do not dance!" shouted Mercy, both sets of dark eyes shooting dangerous sparks at each other.

"Tell the fool what must be voiced!"

"He shall find out in time," whispered Mercy more calmly.

"The time is now," hissed Regret, twisting in his chair to face the Arbiter. "You must know -"

"No!" yelled Mercy once again.

"Shut up!" shouted Regret.

"Enough!"

The voice - belonging to Truth - echoed around the walls of the enormous room, the demand being repeated at least twenty fold.

His breathing deep and ragged, the Prophet took a few precious spare moments to regain his composure, then hovered over in front of the two bickering aliens, his eyes flashing in anger.

"Regret, your childish outbursts will not be tolerated -"

Mercy smirked evilly at the other.

" - But you are correct. Now is the time to tell him of his duties. He must know what is in store for him."

The ashen look on Mercy's face was enough to please Regret for the moment.

"B-but Truth," the defeated Prophet stuttered. "How do we know he will not rebel?"

Three sets of scrutinizing eyes fell upon the Arbiter, making him fidget under the glaring gazes.

"Because," whispered Truth, just loud enough for the Elite to hear. "He has no choice."

Then, as if he had just remembered the source of their arguing, he waved his hand flippantly. "Tell him, Regret."

Nodding, the Prophet came up beside the ebony-armored alien and spoke in confidential tones.

"You serve us, do you not?"

"Yes," replied the Arbiter without hesitation.

"With all that you are?"

"Yes."

"All your soul?"

"Yes"

"All your spirit?"

"Yes."

"All your body?"

"Yes."

"All your mind?"

"Yes."

The room fell into a dead silence; nothing stirred, nothing moved. After several moments you could hear the light _tap, tap, tap _of Mercy's fingers trailing across his throne; the shallow breathing of Truth's aged body; the calculated 'hmm'-ing of Regret's wicked mouth; the nervous shuffling of the Arbiter's hoofed feet.

"Whoever is selected for this...mission...must be strong."

Regret eyed the Elite.

"He must be trustworthy."

Again his gaze fell on the soldier.

"He must be _desperate_."

Confused at this last statement, the alien looked up and probed the Prophet's gaze for answers.

None were found behind that cool facade.

"You are strong,"

He continued.

"You are trustworthy."

A sinking feeling began to form in the pit of the Elite's stomach. His gaze once again fell to the floor.

"You are desperate."

"Desperate, Great One?"

Sighing in frustration, Regret lashed out with harsh words.

"Yes, desperate! You've betrayed your kind, heretic! You have failed. You are desperate for acceptance, forgiveness!"

Wincing under the verbal assault, the Arbiter held his tongue in check.

"_You_, Arbiter, are to be betrothed to the human female. She is to be your _mate_, and you are to _make - her - happy_!"

Huffing now, Regret turned away, giving a disgusted glance back in the direction of the Elite.

Shaking his head, Truth sighed and hovered over towards the soldier before them.

"Arbiter," he spoke almost kindly, though his voice was laced with authority.

Looking up with bitter repressed anger, the Arbiter stood a little taller, in spite of the serious mental blow he had just been dealt.

They were right, he had no choice in the matter.

To refuse orders before would have been life in prison, but now - with him walking on such a thin line - it would mean death.

The task was shameful, a blow to his pride, but he could live.

At least, he hoped so.

"Wipe that pitiful look off your face," snapped Truth harshly.

The Elite instantly took on a blank expression, repressing his emotions, something he had learned to do long ago.

"Do this for us, Arbiter," began Truth, his voice soothing and calm, as if he were speaking to a child "Do this for us, and you will be given the ultimate reward."

The other two Prophets leaned in to hear what Truth was about to say.

"Forgiveness."

"Forgiveness?" he whispered questioningly, the unfamiliar feeling of hope rising in his chest.

"Yes. Carry out your mission with proficiency and a sincere heart, and you shall be forgiven of all the crimes accused of you."

This strange feeling - hope - burst throughout his body, speeding through his veins like adrenaline would.

He was shocked, to say the least.

To be given complete amnesty over his heresy was unbelievable.

So, in this state of mind, he gave his answer.

"When do I meet the girl?"

* * *

><p>Well, there it was. I'd love to know what you think, so please REVIEW, REVIEW, REVIEW!

_ - Kodu_

_ **AN2(04/07/09):** Only a few subtle changes to this chapter, mostly things dealing with consistency and grammar. On to the next chapter!

>

2. Meeting

_A/N: Okay, chapter 2 of "Betrothed"! I've gotten some great reviews on the first chapter, and some really good advice. I won't reply to reviews separately on here, but I'll click on the button below a review that says I can reply to it. I'm pretty sure it sends it as an e-mail when I do that. I haven't tried it yet, though. _

Well, thanks everyone for the encouragement! It means a lot. And to know that my story is original - as far as we know as of yet, that is - is GREAT!

IMPORTANT: Just wondering, is there much said about the Arbiter's past or the customs of the Covenant and the different species within? If so, I need to do some research (or you could just tell me, that'd be great! PLEASE!). If not, I guess I'll be using creative license. I've already used a little bit in this chapter, so bear with me, please.

ENJOY!

_and _

REVIEW!

_ **AN2(04/07/09):** Not much to say here. Just proofing and getting rid of all the little mistakes that have been bugging me. You'll notice a character change - Arby's friend is no longer an OC, but has been replaced by the canonical Zhar. It seemed appropriate.

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><p>2<p>

Meeting

Sonya sat on the edge of her bed, slouched over a camouflage outfit

clutched in her slender fingers. For a moment, she wondered why the rough fabric seemed to be shaking, but after wiping the flood of salty tears out of her eyes, realized it was the reaction from her own trembling hands. Garbed in khaki pants and a simple white tee-shirt, the young soldier let fall the blinding liquid that escaped through her eyes, watching as it soaked into the scratchy material and faded away; leaving that godforsaken ship without so much as a fleeting thought - much like her sanity.

Her life had fallen apart. She had nothing left to live for, unless foolish duty counted for something. She would rather die than face the hell she was bound to go through. The only thing stopping her was her Uncle, Jonas, and even he was having a hard time keeping her loyalty in tact.

Four nights ago, she had considered suicide for the very first time in her life.

Four nights ago, her world had crumbled.

Four nights ago, a living nightmare had replaced the life she had been living.

Four nights ago, she had been betrothed.

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"So...who's the 'lucky' soldier?" She put a sarcastic emphasis on the word 'lucky', making sure her frustration was very evident._

Looking from each other, to the girl, back to each other, the captain and Master Chief rested their eyes on her and let out a long sigh before the white-haired man answered.

_ "You." _

_ "W-wha- " _

_ "Now, Sonya," broke in the commander before she could get another word out. "Please, don't go ballistic." _

_ "Y-you're joking, right?" The smallest bit of hope could easily be detected in her voice._

_ It was destroyed soon._

_ "No," came the gruff voice of the Master Chief. "This is very serious. You're our last hope, soldier." Oh, how he hated to say those words! He would have given anything just to be able to infiltrate the Covenant base and blow up everything that moved inside, but things weren't that easy._

_ "Why me!" she yelled, her face pale and her eyes as round as the moon._

_ "Many reasons," explained the white-haired man, a look close to sympathy - but not quite - plastered on his features._

_ "Firstly, you're the only female in this squadron, which happens to be the closest to their main base. They requested -" A cough, coming from Master Chief, sounded beside him. " - demanded_ - someone to be ready within four days."__

_ "I don't care if I'm the only female in the whole blasted army! Find a gay soldier, for all I care! I'm sure they can't tell the difference!" She was panting heavily from her outburst, which gave the man enough time to continue._

_ "Secondly, you're one of twenty humans - and the only female one, I might add - who can speak their language."__

_ "Why should that even matter?" Sonya began again, slapping a hand against her brow. "That's what translators are for!" She gave the man a look just screaming of the word 'duh'._

_ This time Master Chief broke in, the reflection off his visor giving her a small taste of how wild she looked at the moment._

_ "Because, soldier, they have demanded something else. You are not to be wearing any of your equipment onto their ships. You'll be going as a civilian._

_ Her eyes got wider - if that were even possible - and her mouth gaped open as she uttered one despairing word:
"C-civilian...?"__

_ "I know this must be hard for you..." the commander began, but the rest of his words fell on deaf ears._

No, _she thought. _You have no idea how hard this is for me. You've just condemned me to a life with my most hated enemy. You're making me wed a disgusting animal. You will _never _know how hard this is for me.

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Sonya smiled grimly as she stared at her shabby reflection in the mirror. Hair seemed to jut out in all directions from her head. Her face was red and splotchy, and her eyes were puffed up from crying.

Crying! she thought incredulously.

She was never one to cry. It was a weakness, in her opinion. The last time she had cried was when she had had to leave Jonas to go to military training. And before that...

Fresh tears appeared in her eyes as that horrid image of her parent's mangled and twisted bodies flashed through her mind.

They shouldn't have died like that!

It just wasn't fair!

And because she was forced to witness it, her last memory of them was a disgusting one.

When she thought of her mother, she didn't see her smiling gray eyes, light auburn hair, or a cheery grin. She didn't remember the smell of freshly baked cookies wafting out of the kitchen after coming home from a hard day's work at school. She couldn't hear her soft, sweet voice, singing her to sleep on stormy nights when the lightning and thunder proved too much for her young nerves.

Instead, she saw a bloodied half of a face, the other blasted off somewhere in another corner of the room, bone poking out at odd angles. The flesh - or, that which remained - was either a deathly pale, or a sickeningly charred black. Her hair was strung up against the rafters, holding her body in mid-air and keeping her from falling into a small pile of broken glass. Brain fluid seeped out from where her skull was cracked open by God knew what, and blood dripped lazily down the side of her neck onto the previously white carpet below.

Sonya shuddered, her mind wandering towards what had happened to the rest of her body.

Fingers twisted every which way, white bones sticking out, but that wasn't even the worst part...

"Sonya?"

A knock sounded at the door, making the soldier sigh in relief at having her train of thought broken.

"Yes?"

"The commander wants you at the loading docks in ten minutes for the arrival of the Covenant ship. He also said something about you dolling up...?" the unidentified voice wavered slightly, and Sonya could just feel the smirk coming off of his face.

"Get out," she growled and was rewarded with the sound of quickly retreating footsteps.

Kicking the camouflage uniform she had unknowingly dropped in the floor under the bed, Sonya shuffled over towards her dressing room to further evaluate her appearance.

She brushed her fingers through her hair, rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, and forced herself to calm down to reduce the red splotches on her face, yet no matter what she tried, nothing could cure the cold and distant look engraved in her gaze.

The soldier walked out the door as she was, her last thought before crossing the threshold between reality and nightmare being: _To hell with the commander; I wear make up for no monster. _

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Jet black eyes scanned the vast reaches of space, watching as the millions and billions of tiny suns - stars - floated by at an alarming pace. Ever since his encounter with the Prophets four days ago, everything had seemed like a dream to the Arbiter.

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Mated to a human...

The Elite shook his head and growled deep in his throat, startling a Grunt that had happened to walk by at that moment.

Disgraceful, his thoughts recommenced as the trembling little beast flitted away.

Dark eyes scanned around the control room, taking in the familiar surroundings of the Covenant ship he would soon leave.

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And when I return...

Once again his head nodded from side-to-side and he slit his eyes, thinking of the weakling human he would have to accommodate.

How shall I bed her? The thought, making the Arbiter's eyes widen in shock, came of its own accord, and he immediately regretted imagining such a thing.

But he couldn't help but wonder! Would she be like an Elite female? And, if not, how could he...?

Shivering, the Elite grunted and tried to think of anything - _anything_- but that.

He thought of his homeland and wondered, for the very first time in his life, if he would ever get to see it again. If the war ended, he might be able to return to his own planet. Granted, he had no family there, but just to breathe in his native air would be a blessing! Would the female join him?

_No, no! _he yelled inside his head, jerking towards the left to look out a window facing a strange cluster of stars._ I will die before I let such disgusting filth lay one foot on my planet._

With that resolution, the Arbiter gave his reflection from the window a curt nod, as if confirming to himself his intentions.

"I wonder what it will look like," he whispered to himself, thinking

of the primitive monkey he was soon to meet.

"I heard she's quite striking," answered an unexpected voice from behind, causing the Arbiter to spin around and smack straight into a wall.

The wall turned out to be his exceptionally tall friend, Zhar.

The elite before him turned up his mandibles in what could only be described as a sneer, though in truth the action was much more friendly.

"Zhar!" the Arbiter stated in surprise, eyeing the Elite's shining silver armor. "I didn't realize you were aboard this ship!"

"And I didn't realize you were the one Claiming the human!" replied his friend, the 'sneer' still on his face.

Snarling deeply, the Arbiter slit his eyes dangerously and turned his back towards the other.

"Not Claiming, friend." he spoke bitterly. "Betrothed."

Rolling his eyes, the silver-armored Elite stepped in front of his friend, studying his form from large black hooves, to onyx colored breastplate, to the unnaturally dull ebony eyes.

"Friend, what is wrong?"

The black-clad Elite gave Zhar an incredulous look, his lower mandibles nearly gaping open in surprise.

"Are you blind? I'm being forced to mate with a dirty, filthy, primitive beast! And you're asking me what's wrong?"

The once dull eyes flared into a fire of fury.

Good, the other thought grimly to himself._ At least he's back to his old self._

Holding up his hands, Zhar replied.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on their, friend! I meant no harm."

Moments passed with the ebony-armored Elite staring down at his friend with cold, black eyes. Slowly the eyes softened, and the Arbiter let out a sigh-like sound, shaking his head and taking a few steps back.

No harm, indeed, he thought, watching as Zhar took careful strides towards the window.

Watching absently as the millions of stars floated by, the silver Elite folded his large, clawed hands behind his back and glanced over towards the other.

Coming to stand by him, the Arbiter leaned against the glass-like material and stared out at the growing human ship, War Monger.

"Tell me," he spoke resignedly, "of this human."

Zhar grinned, but avoided eye contact as he spoke.

"She's plain, in human standards. Light brown hair, tanned features from military training."

Glancing at the Arbiter, the Elite continued.

"But...they say her..._eyes_..."

"Eyes?" The Arbiter questioned after his friend failed to continue.

"Golden. Or, probably more likely, amber."

"Strange."

"Quite."

Most Elite's had black eyes or, in rarer cases, gray. Human's, they had found, had varying eye colors such as green, brown, or even blue. Those were common among their species. But golden was different.

The human ship was rapidly growing in size, now. Groups of Grunts were chattering at each other in their native tongue, the Arbiter only able to catch a few phrases.

"Prepare for docking," one yelled.

"Human ship coming up," another one shouted from behind.

"Shields down!"

"Get ready!"

"Arbiter," spoke Zhar, noting how his friend tensed with every spoken word.

Like a tight spring itching to uncoil, the Elite snapped back.

"What!"

A few moment's silence, broken by a ragged breath or two, then the other Elite spoke again.

"Go to the door. We're landing in a few minutes." His manner was very civil - almost cold - towards the troubled alien, yet the Arbiter consented with a nod of his head.

Before he left, as the door was closing behind him, the ebony-armored Elite heard the distinct sound of Zhar's voice drifting over the noise to reach his ears.

"Don't give up," he called sadly.

Unbeknownst to him, that time was soon to come.

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Sitting ominously before her was the sleek purple ship which carried her fate; the engines - or, at least, she assumed them to be as such - pulsating a strange, eerie blue light before fading completely.

Before she had time to gather her thoughts, Sonya watched as a smooth piece of the alien craft slowly lowered from the adjoining material. It touched ground, and for a moment the image went blurry.

Hopes raised, she expected the thing to dematerialize before her, like in a dream, but soon realized it was her own eyes getting watery.

Wiping her tears furiously, the soldier looked back up, clenching her jaw to keep herself strong.

A large, yawning hole seemed to have replaced the door, and a blinding white light shot out of said hole. It would have been appropriate for smoke to billow out of that gaping entrance like the gates to hell.

Instead, two silhouettes appeared and began to slowly make their descent.

First, two sets of large, hoof-like feet broke away from the light, becoming visible to the dozen or so employees watching the display. Then armor-plated legs and armor-plated bodies. After what seemed like years of tension, the heads came into view, and Sonya nearly collapsed with disbelief.

They were even uglier up close!

I have to get away, she thought desperately, flicking her eyes around the room looking for an escape.

The commander of _War Monger _seemed to read her mind, and instinctively placed a tight grip on her arm, keeping her in place.

Trapped!

The two alien monsters glanced her way, causing the girl to shiver. Those dark, black eyes sliced right through her body and probed her soul, taunting her with her own fears. Ugly four-part mouth's hung slightly open, revealing row upon row of sharp, rigged teeth.

This was it. She would die, she knew it. Her life was to be given to these disgusting, blood-thirsty monsters like some living sacrifice to a sick pagan god.

There was no way the humans could win this war.

And she was the deciding factor in whether or not they survived.

Humanity rested on her shoulders.

Mankind was counting on her.

Did she really have any choice?

Hell yeah!

To hell with humanity!

She could care less!

She was about to make another attempt at escape when a thought stopped her.

How could she abandon her Uncle Jonas?

He was everything to her. He loved and cared for her; raised her, clothed her, fed her! She couldn't single-handedly destroy mankind's hopes and dreams.

Well, not with him still alive, at least.

Nearly about to collapse from this mental battle, Sonya looked up once again to find two more Elite's coming out behind the first two. One - armored in red - was apparently the commander of their ship. The other...

He was something the soldier had never seen before.

Onyx-colored armor to match the inky black expanse of space covered him from head to toe, wispy silver spikes and swirls etched on the breastplate and helmet; small, jagged metal-like armor jutted out of four tiny strips that covered his four mouth parts.

He carried himself with an air of regality and... danger.

Spine turning to ice, Sonya couldn't help but shudder upon seeing such a magnificently terrifying beast.

They were all monsters, but this one seemed exceptionally fierce.

Following her gaze, the commander let go of her arm and leaned towards her to whisper in her ear while the Elites were conversing.

"Watch your tongue around them," he said first in a harsh tone. Then, more softly, "That's the one. In the black armor. That's your..."

He didn't have to finish that sentence.

Sonya gave him a death glare warning him not to.

And, besides, the Covenant scum had turned to face them.

"Commander Donald?" the red Elite spoke in English, his tones ruff and gravelly and his accent very strange. His annoyance at his inability to speak the human language was painfully apparent, as a

fierce scowl was permanently etched onto his face.

Nodding, the commander took a step forward, motioning for Sonya to follow behind him.

The soldier followed her orders and kept her eyes to the ground so she wouldn't have to look at the disgusting monsters a mere few feet away.

Two hooves occupied half of her view as she listened half-heartedly to the commander speaking negotiations with the Elite.

Two more hooves appeared after a few minutes, and - with painstakingly slow caution - Sonya lifted her head to stare into the dark black eyes of her - she shuddered to think about it - mate-to-be.

"Sonya," barked the commander suddenly, causing the girl to jump with surprise. Shakily she lifted her face to meet the stern - if sympathetic - glare of the white-haired man.

"Go with him -" he jerked his head in the direction of the Arbiter. "Over there -" this time tossing it towards a secluded corner of the room. "And talk for a while. Me and Jor 'Nalee," he stumbled over the foreign name, unknowingly giving it a heavy, clumsy sound. "Need to discuss some matters."

"C-commander..." Sonya began to protest, but one sharp glare from her superior cut her short. "Come on," she said resignedly, hanging her head and trudging towards the instructed corner.

The _thump, thump, thump _of large footsteps behind her reminded the girl of the beast following her every move, like a shadow.

Slitting his eyes, the Arbiter studied the girl's back carefully, watching the tiny trembling movements her hands made, the tense shoulders, how her strange-colored light brown hair waved gently with ever step she took; how her shoulders slumped forward slightly and her head hung in the most pitiful manner.

He watched as she stopped, turning around so slowly he wondered if she ever meant to face him; looked at the shocking amber eyes and was stunned by their depth for a moment; held her gaze for a moment longer and saw the endless grief, pain, and sorrow buried in those magnificent orbs.

Sonya, in turn, studied him with a guarded gaze, shuddering ever so slightly at the imposing form. Oh, how her fingers itched for a gun - any gun! - at that moment. She had only stood this close to a Covenant Elite once in the war, and had blown it's head off two seconds afterwards. To be so close to danger with no weapon, no armor, no shield, and no means of protection or self defense made the soldier even more afraid of the monster than she should have been.

He was tall, easily three feet above her, but his neck was curved downward, making him a little less imposing.

Looking into it's eyes, Sonya could tell it was brimming with questions and aching for answers.

But, Lord knew, she wasn't going to be the first to talk!

So a few moments awkward silence settled upon the human and alien. The commanders of both human and alien ships could be heard droning on about something or other.

Letting out a large breath, the Arbiter flicked his gaze around _War Monger_, studying the hanger with a frightening intensity.

"Planning for an ambush?" she mumbled incoherently under her breath, her own strange eyes watching the beast before her carefully.

"If I wanted you dead, you would be dead already," replied the Elite with a smirk, watching as the human girl's eyes widened in shock and her brows creased in frustration.

"B-but how did you - ?"

"I _do_ _have_ ears, you know," he answered, his voice laced with sarcasm. "They're just not jutting out of my head like those flabby pieces of flesh on your face."

"I'd rather have flesh than your slimy, scaly hide." Her nose wrinkled at the thought and she shuddered visibly, shaking her head.

Slitting his eyes, the Arbiter took a step forward and let out a deep chuckle as the soldier stumbled backwards.

"Scared, human?"

Gripping the railing she had backed into so hard her fist turned white, Sonya shook her head.

"Never, monster."

In one quick movement, the Elite latched onto the girl's arms with both his slender claws - the pressure hard enough to hurt, but not strong enough to break the skin - and pulled her about a foot away from his tall, lanky chest. His head was arched above her, and he inhaled deeply, ruffling the hair atop her head.

Sonya shook, her eyes forced closed and her jaw clenched to prevent her teeth from chattering.

The Arbiter felt her shake.

"I can smell your fear."

Shouting out weakly, the girl wrenched herself free from the Covenant alien's grip and slid back against the rail a little ways.

"Stay away from me, monster," she stated flatly, the look in her eyes wild and determined.

Idiot! The Arbiter wanted to yell at her. _We're to be mated!_

But, even after these few days, the thought chilled him to the bone,

and he wasn't about to bring that horrid image up again.

Instead, he resigned himself to make the best of this situation, and it would do no good to frighten the primate he was married to into a shell of a woman.

"Human," he answered as calmly as he could.

Sonya was shocked to hear the steel and ice in his voice completely dissipate. Her mind was screaming to her that it was a trap, but she unconsciously took a step forward.

Still tense, the Arbiter noted absentmindedly as the girl moved closer towards his imposing form. But brave, nonetheless.

Standing before an enemy, completely outmatched?

It was either very courageous, or very stupid.

Or forced upon oneself.

"What..." He paused for a moment, looking deep into her breathtaking eyes filled with utter misery. Something in them had sparked, and he knew it to have been a resolution.

She was determined to do something, he just didn't know what that was yet.

"What shall I call you," he finished.

Slightly shocked, Sonya reconsidered the thought she had just had of completely ignoring the monster and began to think more along the lines of a shaky, mutual peace.

After all, he was being forced to wed her, too, wasn't he?

"S-Sonya," she answered with unease. "Sonya Dable."

He snorted and turned slightly, satisfied with her answer.

After concluding that that was all he would say, the soldier posed her own question.

"And...what will I call you?"

"I am the Arbiter."

"Is that your name?"

"No."

Noticing her confused look, the Elite shook his head and turned towards the girl once again.

"I have no name."

He spoke as if that would explain things, but it only confused Sonya even more.

"Why? Are the Covenant not given names?"

He growled and slit his eyes, angry at her stupidity. He was about to explain that the Covenant was not a race, but more like an army which has many races recruited into it. That, technically, the Covenant did not give names, but each kind is dubbed according to the name given by their parents. In the aspect of naming their offspring, at least, both humans and aliens were alike.

But a vision of himself standing before the Prophets, accused of treason for giving the human too much information, passed through his mind and he held his tongue.

He would have to watch himself around the girl. There was no telling what the Holy Ones could charge him with while mated to her.

"I had a name, but not anymore, thanks to your Demon."

"Demon?"

Turning his head towards the green giant standing near the white-haired commander, the Arbiter let out a low, vicious growl and slit his eyes. Oh, how he wanted to rip that monster's heart out of it's very chest! As fury blinded his vision, the Elite vaguely grasped thinking if it would bleed red, like most humans, or black, like the tale of the beasts which lived in a lake of fire.

"Your kind call him Master Chief, I believe."

"Oh," Sonya whispered shakily, the malice in his voice turning her spine to ice and making her involuntarily take a step back.

Snapping out of his blood lust, the Arbiter turned once again towards the girl and nearly rolled his eyes at seeing her fear.

"As I stated before, if I wanted you dead, I would have already killed you. You do not have to fear me."

Well, that's so very comforting, she thought sarcastically, then stopped herself, wondering if he could read minds as well.

"So, Arbiter, it is?" For a fleeting moment, a thought crossed her mind which made her smile. Arbiter. Are bitter. He really _was_ bitter.

He watched as the tiniest of smiles graced her lips, something he was sure to never to see again. For, after spending six months on his alien ship, she would surely be shaken to a point past revival. And, even if she survived that ordeal, what must eventually come to pass would...

Blocking the thought out of his mind, the Elite eyed the girl once again.

"You know what is expected of us?"

"Yes." Her voice was laced with suppressed anger.

He didn't believe her.

"We mate through both our ceremonies. The human way, and the Covenant way."

"I know," she stated irritably.

"And what happens after...?"

At this she looked at him aghast, taking several steps back.

"Of course we don't have to do that!" Her face had taken on a pale, pasty complexion and she had begun to shake her head vigorously, as if afraid he would rape her then and there.

Humans, the Arbiter thought, inwardly rolling his eyes.

"The treaty called for a betrothal - two weddings, mating, whatever you want to call it - but it said nothing of consummating those idiotic ceremonies!"

"But you, girl, have no idea of our mating ceremonies," the Elite retorted darkly. "Understand this, human, if nothing else!"

Suddenly his voice had risen considerably - still low enough to keep the others from hearing, though - and he took several steps forward until he had cornered the girl and his nose was nearly touching hers.

"We are different from your kind. Much different! Yes, we have the ceremony, but our law states that until the sacred acts are performed - or, as you call it, we consummate our betrothal - the linking is not legitimate!"

Sonya grew paler, if that were possible, and slumped against the wall. For a few eerie moments, she stared emotionless into the eyes of the monster she was to be forever wed to. Her hand flew to her chest as a single sob choked out of her throat. It was a moment of weakness that she couldn't allow herself to show, especially not in front of this 'Arbiter' creature, but show it she did, as silent, unbidden tears leaked from her eyes.

Blinking in confusion, the Arbiter bent his neck further down to try and get a look at the weeping woman's face.

"Human...?" he said, unsure of what to do in a situation like this.

Comfort her?

Never.

But, she was to be his mate.

No, not mate. That word was associated with someone you liked - loved.

So was he just to leave her?

What would the Prophets say to abandonment, a crime worse than beating?

Treason.

Comfort wasn't one of his better qualities, so he went with the next best thing.

"Soldier," he barked, hoping this would catch her attention. "Get up, woman. This is pitiful. Either all humans are spineless, or you are just an exceptionally weak member of the race."

"W-weak!" she shouted, her voice dry and painfully hoarse. "Leave me alone, beast," she said, drained from the rage she had felt moments before.

Snorting, the Arbiter straightened up to his full height and turned his back towards her, striding over to Jor 'Nalee and the human commander.

Pitiful thing, he thought absentmindedly. How could a race so weak even come close to defeating my kind?

Taking his place by Jor, the Elite cocked his head and watched as Sonya emerged from the darkened corner she had been crying in. Her face was stony, not even tear streaks remained on the mask she wore.

But it was just a mask.

The Arbiter knew that, underneath the layer of fire and grace she showed, she was a frightened child, too old to run from her troubles, yet too young to understand why she couldn't.

And that, in some sick twist of Fate, both he and she were inevitably linked in their miseries, just as much as they were linked in their betrothal.

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><p>AN2(0607/09):** _As you can see, I changed up names a bit to keep it a little more accurate with Halo canon. Also, chapter three should be out in a few days! If I happen to slack on that promise, feel free to PM me with creative threats~ So that seems about it for house cleaning. Time to write up what happens next..._

_ - Kodu
>

3. Dance With The Devil

AN: Three years and four months is a long time to wait for an update... so I come bearing gifts? This chapter is literally twice as long as the previous two. (I had been trying to stick with a 6k mark per chapter, and this one is a couple hundred words shy of 13k.) If I stick with this length, updates will be slower, but I'll be able to get a lot more accomplished in each chapter.

So, hello everyone! It's been a while, but I've decided to try and pick this story up again. I feel like my writing ability has finally

evolved to a level worthy of doing this plot some justice. I want to thank everyone for all your wonderful reviews - I've even gotten some _years _after the last update! That kind of encouragement was partially why I decided to pick around in this story again. That, and I ran across a few pictures of Arby, and had a fangirlish meltdown...

That said, on to chapter three of Betrothed! I certainly hope it was worth the wait.

Playlist: Dance With The Devil [Breaking Benjamin]

* * *

><p>Chapter 3

Dance With the Devil, and You Just Might Get Burned

_-
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"Trembling, crawling across my skin

>Feeding your cold, dead eyes
Stealing the life of mine"

Dance With The Devil by Breaking Benjamin

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It didn't make sense.

None of it_ made sense_.

Sonya sat huddled towards the head of her bed, arms wrapped securely around the knees she had drawn up against her chest. She leaned forward, burying her head in her own warmth, trying to block out the footsteps that tapped noisily on the other side of the door. Despite the fact that her own world was crumbling before her very eyes, the ship itself was as busy as ever; the whir and buzz of machinery a constant background to distant voices and shouted commands. It was musical, in a way, like an urban city screeching out its un-heavenly notes to assault the senses. The beat was so full, so all-encompassing, that it was almost as if you could reach out and touch _it, or smell the heavy rhythm, or taste the timbre of each different noise.

Sonya couldn't escape it. She'd never been able to escape it before, and her increasing claustrophobia was just getting ridiculous.

Betrothed.

Why did the very word make her tremble?

A sound between a whine and a snarl choked past her throat, adding to the intensity of volume surrounding her unwilling form. It all felt so very ethereal - so _fake _- that the female soldier was tempted to

pinch herself to try and wake up from this horrid nightmare. But there was the sound, the noise, the War Monger's very own primal song to beat into her skull that, no, this was not a dream.

She was awake.

She was betrothed to an alien.

And, damn it all, she was about two seconds away from unloading a round of shotgun shells into the side of the spacecraft in an attempt to bleed out what remaining oxygen kept her alive.

Death didn't sound too fun, but it definitely sounded more entertaining than spending the rest of her days with a cocky Covenant bastard.

"Dable?"

A knock sounded at the door to her quarters only seconds after the muffled voice called out. Sonya pressed her face closer to her arms for a moment, praying desperately that the man on the other side of the door would drop dead.

"... Sonya?"

Well, it seemed God wasn't taking calls at the moment.

"Leave me alone, Jonathan." Her voice sounded much too whiny to her own ears, but it couldn't be helped. The familiar tenor of her blonde-haired friend's voice was easily recognizable, and though some might have thought she would appreciate the company of a close acquaintance, all she wanted to do at that moment was huddle on her bed and fester in her own misery.

"I'm coming in," called the persistent man, making the brunette groan.

"You don't have clearance, idiot."

Seeing as she was the only female soldier on a ship full of males, it had been the chief's top priority to keep her feminine decency in tact. No one had the right key card to unlock her door except for the captain and herself. (Which, admittedly, was a scandal in and of itself.)

"I swindled it off of old Bald Top."

A nickname no one dared mention to the captain's face.

Sonya grumbled loudly, straightening up from her slumped position to glare daggers at the door.

"What if I'm naked?"

"Then I'm definitely coming in." And with that, the tell-tale beep of the card being swiped through the lock was heard.

"Men," the female soldier growled, standing up and crossing her arms before turning towards her friend.

Jonathan let his eyes trail around her room, commenting briefly that she had rearranged since last time he'd been on the inside, before letting his eyes fall on Sonya.

"You look like shit."

She practically snarled.

"I just won a war. I'm supposed to look like shit."

"You know what I mean."

She knew exactly what he meant. Just a few minutes ago, Sonya had been staring into her bathroom mirror, fascinated that the dull eyes staring back could possibly be her own reflection. They had looked so lifeless, so devoid of hope, as if the spirit inside had died long ago. She had reached out then, too, and traced the outline of her face against the smooth glass, circling her lips, running her thumb across the rings of black under her eyes. The person - no, thing - mimicking her every move had seemed more like a ghost than a mirror-image of reality.

She may have known what he meant, but that didn't mean she would acknowledge it.

"Flattering endearments aside," she spoke, words laced with sarcasm.
"What are you here for?"

The blonde merely blinked, his eyelids sliding shut and opening once again in a slow, practiced motion. She leveled her own gaze on him, and for several long seconds they seemed locked in a stare-off. Jonathan's competitive masculinity definitely gave him an edge in the proceedings, but Sonya's no-nonsense feminism easily cut through those waves of male masochism he radiated. In the end, no amount of testosterone could stand up to the sheer force of estrogen coming from an intensely pissed off woman.

"Orders," he finally said, grudgingly withdrawing from the competition. "I'm here to make sure you don't try to chisel your way out of the side of the ship."

Figures, Sonya thought despairingly, uncrossing her arms and letting her fingertips brush her sides.

"What about blasting my way out?"

"Ah, no. Sorry. There seems to be a 'no gunfire' subclause in my contract."

"Damn."

So, suicide was no longer an option.

Just peachy.

He smiled at her briefly, comfortable with this familiar banter, but the genial look soon fell to one of concern.

"Are you alright?"

If Sonya had a dime for every person who had asked her that since the announcement of her Betrothal, she would have been a wealthy woman.

"Oh, just ecstatic! I can't tell you how excited I am to give an alien the opportunity to fuc-"

"_Sonya_. "

She sighed, running a hand down the side of her face before slumping back down to the edge of the bed. For a long while, all she could do was stare at her upturned hands resting lightly on her knees, rapt with attention as her fingers flexed one-by-one in small, twitching motions. When the weight of another made her mattress dip down beside her, the brunette turned distant eyes onto her friend.

"They... killed them, Jonathan."

Her parents, of course.

"I know."

"_He _killed them."

Not personally, but in essence it was all the same.

"I know, Sonya."

"How could the captain ever ask this of me?"

Now _that _he didn't know. In theory, it was the most logical step to be made. The male soldier himself was still grappling with the fact that they had made a peace treaty with those Covenant bastards; that the war might be over with a few spoken words, and a few displeased individuals. It only stung because he knew the victi--err, _bride, personally. If it had been any other female besides Sonya, he honestly probably wouldn't have given a damn. It wounded his own pride, to a degree, to think that his entire career as a soldier had been put to waste in the course of a few days, but just looking at Sonya instantly quelled those dangerously reckless thoughts. Sure, his pride had been stepped on, but at least he would have the opportunity to go back to his friends and family. The woman beside him, on the other hand, was being forced to embrace an entirely new set of friends and family; forced to embrace a whole new _world_.

"Are you hungry?"

Obvious subject change was so very obvious.

"I feel like throwing up."

"Right. But are you _hungry_?"

Sonya's face screwed up in a mix of agitation and humor. Jonathan could be such a silly idiot, sometimes.

"Only if you're buying," she sighed almost reluctantly, lifting up off of the bed at the same moment Jonathan did.

"Stuff your face to the brim, _mon petit cochon_. I've got money to spare!"

It was a personal joke of theirs. The mess hall on the ship was like a giant open buffet, and was completely free. Beyond that fact, if they _had_ _had_ to pay for their food, it would have been Sonya paying for Jonathan's meal - he was just cheap like that.

"Lead the way," she stated softly, then followed him out the door, listening as it slid closed behind them.

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When the door clicked closed, locking the small group in relative privacy, the Arbiter felt the weight of his self-imposed imprisonment crash down upon him. A chill raced up his spine, though he kept his composure while turning to face Jor 'Nalee. The fellow Elite seemed stony and rigid in posture, and the Arbiter surely couldn't blame him. The entire ship was infested with the rank smell of humans, and had the higher ranked aliens not been used to the odor by then, they might have cringed at the overwhelming scent. It wasn't as if an Elite's senses were high above average - under normal circumstances, both Covenant members would have barely noticed the smell - but the sheer concentration of humans aboard the _War Monger_ was enough to make any alien warrior edgy.

These were enemies, not allies.

At least, not yet.

"Commander Jor, is it?" asked the white-haired human, and the Arbiter turned his attention towards the weak looking monkey before them. He seemed so fragile, old, and not for the first time since his arrival on the human vessel the Elite wondered how the man's obvious rule had not been overthrown. His species based prestige off of strength and merit - it seemed the humans only based it off of merit.

"'Nalee," the red-armored Elite answered in kind, his words wrapping around that single, familiar syllable with practiced ease. It physically pained him to hear any human use his name in such a casual manner, but what had to be done was simply unavoidable.

"'Nalee," the captain repeated, nodding once before turning around to face both aliens at an equal angle. They were imposing creatures up close, he could admit to that, though his own posture remained rigid and firm. He was an honored veteran, a man of rank and status, and had been far closer to much more hostile aliens than the two standing before him now.

"Both of you are, of course, aware of the delicacy of this situation."

The Arbiter nearly growled at the words, but held his anger in check.

"Yes," 'Nalee answered for the both of them, flashing his gaze

towards the black-clad Elite briefly before turning back to the human commander.

"Our terms are uncompromisable."

"As are ours."

There was a moment of silence where both parties took in the implications of that statement, before Captain Donald continued.

"I suppose you'll want to leave as soon as possible."

"Conditions permitting, yes."

The man nodded once, then moved off to the side and skirted around a table set up in the closed off room. There were two chairs directly adjacent to the wall, one of which the commander occupied, and two more with their backs to the door. The Arbiter and Jor 'Nalee settled down in the empty chairs, shifting to try and get accustomed to the too-small seats. They most certainly weren't designed for an alien body, and in the end there really was no way to make it all that comfortable.

"You have to understand," began the human commander. "This whole ordeal is still a... shock, to most of us."

The Arbiter could have rolled his eyes. It was still a shock to him. What did that pitiful human know of surprises?

"When we first heard the treaty had been made official, we began preparations for the ceremony right away. One day to order supplies, three for those supplies to arrive... The documents and papers must be written up, not to mention the legally binding contracts that will hold you to your end of the deal, though the proof of a marriage license needs to be one of our top priorities."

"How long?" 'Nalee cut in.

The commander paused, glancing from one Elite to the next before finally letting his gaze rest on the groom-to-be.

"Four days, at best. A week, at most."

One week aboard that hell-hole.

The Arbiter suppressed a groan.

Jor 'Nalee only nodded, taking in this information with an objective air. He and his comrades would board their own Covenant ship and fly alongside the War Monger during this time, only coming in contact with the humans once again on the day of the ceremony. The Arbiter, on the other hand, would not be so lucky. After this initial meeting, the Elite commander had been told that his fellow warrior was to spend the rest of his time on the human ship, in the presence of his mate. It seemed like a cruel punishment, but 'Nalee didn't really care either way. It was what the heretic deserved, after all - to suffer the greatest shame in order to bring their race the greatest victory.

"And this 'ceremony'," the Arbiter cut in, speaking at last. "What

does it entail?"

"Legally, you only need to sign a few documents."

Nothing was ever that easy, though.

"However," the white-haired man continued. "Your Prophets want us to go through the motions of an actual wedding. For appearances sake, and as a sort of... safety net."

"Safety net?"

"In case the papers fall through."

Right.

Human politics had never made sense to the Elite - he supposed their mating rituals would be performed in the same confusing manner.

"What of the female?"

'Nalee was the one to ask that, his long-fingered hands clenching slightly as he leaned forward in the uncomfortable seat.

"What about her?" The human captain seemed slightly bereft of his stoic composure, a sort of defensiveness overtaking his hard features.

"Is she of sound physical and mental condition?"

Couldn't let something sickly or diseased be given as their Arbiter's mate, after all. It would be embarrassing to the Covenant itself, let alone offensive to their Holy Prophets.

"Sonya is one of our finest female soldiers. She mans the armory, and is a self-appointed weapons expert."

Now _that _surprised the Arbiter. How could such a sniveling little human hold a reputation like that? He had met her personally only a few hours ago, and had been highly disappointed by her cowering nature. Though it was infinitely better than the starkly rebellious attitude he had been expecting, the Elite couldn't help but feel disgust over her misery. He had seen a spark of strength in her, true, but that mattered little to him in the long run. The idiotic human wouldn't last a week on his Covenant ship, let alone an entire lifetime by his side.

"And her mental state?"

There was a long pause, a moment of awkward silence where the human commander had to fight to keep from glaring at the Elite who had opened his mouth. Filthy monsters, daring to traipse onto his ship and question the abilities of his soldiers. It was enough to get him riled up, but he had too many years beneath his belt to let his anger get the best of him.

"Sonya is--"

The metallic _shiiink _of the door sliding open interrupted what he

was about to say.

Both aliens turned their heads to the side to eye the intruder while the human commander lifted his gaze to stare directly at the imposing figure in the doorway.

"Master Chief. Glad you could make it."

The green giant in question tilted his head towards the older man.

"Captain."

For the breadth of a moment, a beat of silence followed that near-mechanical voice. A sudden shift of powers had occurred the moment the Spartan had stepped through the door, leaving both Elites in the wake of this unspoken power play. Standing before the two Covenant members was the very being who had decimated one of their Holy Rings; a man with a death toll unheard of, whose very hands were stained with the blood of their comrades.

Standing before the Arbiter was the very human who had ended his rise in the Covenant's race, and who had veritably marked him a heretic, banning him from taking that first step when all his kind began the Great Journey.

It took everything within the Elite to not jump out of his chair then and there and thrust the energy sword attached to his hip straight through the Demon's middle.

Not that he would ever get that far, but one could hope.

"What is he doing here?" The Arbiter's deep voice growled out evenly as he lifted from his seat and twisted around to face the other man.

"'_He_'," replied the Master Chief, "Is here to keep you in line."

"So you see our treaty as null, do you?"

The Elite made a grab for his energy sword, but a hand stopped him.

"Save your spirit for the human female, Arbiter." Jor 'Nalee released his subordinate, then turned steely black eyes onto the Demon he had heard so much about. The other man was certainly imposing up close, nearly rivaling the height and size of one of his own kind. It was an interesting display to see the tension rise between both the heretic Elite and the human who had made him fall to such disgrace, but they didn't have all day and 'Nalee was eager to get off of the human vessel and once again board his own ship.

Shaking the other off with an agitated sigh, the Arbiter kept his cold gaze focused entirely on the armor-clad man in front of him. It wouldn't do to let that man out of his sights.

"Well, if you two are finished," spoke the captain of War Monger, his hands pressed tightly to the edge of the table. Sometime during the little disturbance, he had risen from his seat and gripped the

table to keep from interfering. "We have matters to discuss."

The Master Chief nodded once, then breezed past the Elite that was still glaring at him. The beast took a step back to accommodate his size, then turned so he was once again facing the table. 'Nalee and the human captain had already taken their seats once again, and the green-armored Demon himself was settling down into the empty chair beside the other human - the chair that, coincidentally, happened to be directly in front of the Arbiter's own seat.

The Elite hesitated for a moment, every nerve in his body screaming to lash out and use this opportunity to fight back, but common sense overruled those frivolous thoughts, and a minute later he found himself sitting down across from the human that had ruined his life.

He doubted the day could get any worse.

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Despite the fact that Sonya had been almost entirely certain that nothing could ruin her day further, the impossible occurrence was in fact accomplished.

In theory, blending into the crowd during dinner time and diving into the mess hall to bleed away her worries with a few hours of mindless conversation, while listening to the sound of hundreds of voices droning on in the background, had been a fairly good idea. In practice, it sucked.

"Remind me again why I let you drag me here," she stage-whispered to her blonde-haired companion, eyes firmly planted on the plastic tray she carried.

"Uh... because it's my treat?"

"Oh. Right."

She had been jipped, if an already free meal was all she was getting out of this ordeal.

She could hear the whispers as they walked by; some of the words muffled or too soft to make out definite phrases, others practically shouted as she passed. Murmurs of her recent betrothal, sympathetic glances mixed with looks of disgust. Oh, she had been the butt of everyone's pity ever since the news had been announced, but now that the creature was actually here, their views had been tainted. She was to wed a monster, an alien, and Sonya knew better than anyone how, on a ship full of men, most any subject would instantly be attributed to sex. This topic was far too juicy and obvious to pass up. The only problem was... no one really wanted to think about it in the first place - it just happened.

The whispered words were the kinder end of the bargain.

"That thing's got a pretty ugly mug, don't it?"

Spoken a little too loudly as she skirted around one particular table.

"If I had to screw with a bastard like that, I'd shoot myself."

He fingers tightened around the tray she held.

"Ha! I always thought bestiality was illegal. Guess I was wrong!"

She felt trapped, and suddenly it was very hard for her to breathe. All she wanted to do was sit down in some secluded corner of the mess hall and fill her upset stomach with food she didn't even want, while chatting it up with her friend Jonathan in an effort to forget the hellish nightmare she now found herself in, and possibly lock herself in her room and not come out again until the day of the ceremony, and... and dammit, why was it so hard to breathe!

Sonya lurched forward suddenly, knocking an unsuspecting bystander to the side in an effort to find some kind of relief from the crowd surrounding her. Men were everywhere, filling up every inch of the room, laughing and joking and adding more to the level of volume in the room. She burst forth into a small pocket of clear space and nearly doubled over with relief.

It was a miracle her food was still on her tray.

She heard loud, rhythmic footsteps come to a halt beside her, and a comforting hand found its way to her shoulder, making her look up.

"Next time you decide you need some spontaneous exercise," Jonathan commented, panting lightly. "Warn me, okay?"

She nodded once, then frowned lightly, glancing around the room.

"There's too many people here."

Jonathan nearly rolled his eyes.

"There's always this many people here, Sonya."

"Stop being an ass."

"Ouch. That really hurt."

Sonya did roll her eyes at that, then shrugged off the hand still on her shoulder and punched her companion lightly in the side.

"And you wonder why women won't have anything to do with you."

He pouted, and the brunette had to laugh at the ridiculous look on his features. She opened her mouth to shoot off another remark, but paused when something caught her attention.

The room had fallen completely silent.

Blinking, Sonya twisted around to find the source of this odd

phenomenon, but even standing on tiptoe she couldn't see over most of the men's heads. It wasn't hard to figure out why everyone had hushed all noise, though, because every face was turned towards the back entrance to the mess hall, where one decidedly inhuman body stood out amongst the rest.

"Looks like your hubby came to crash the part--OUCH!-- Hey!"

Sonya felt no remorse for elbowing her friend in the side, and prayed inwardly that it would bruise. She could have done much worse, and it was this silent threat that kept Jonathan quiet.

The Arbiter had already been in a bad mood ever since his meeting with the captain of the ship and the Spartan, so it was no surprise that his mood had soured upon learning that 'Nalee and his crew would be returning to their own ship... minus one decidedly obligated Elite. He was to stay on the human's War Monger until the end of their ceremony. During the meeting, he had at least hoped that he wouldn't be the only one to suffer such a fate, but it seemed he was now the sole Covenant member trapped in a vessel full of tentative allies who all hated his guts.

His mouth set in a grim line, the Arbiter pressed through the mess hall, snatched up an empty tray, and proceeded to make his way over to the line. The human food looked odd, but he had already resigned himself to getting used to such small things. The sea of soldiers parted before him, each man stepping to the side not out of courtesy, but out of disgust.

That's right, humans, the Elite thought darkly, dropping his tray down on the line of metal bars outlining the buffet. Gaze upon the heretic. I've suffered far worse.

His dark eyes skirted across the array of strange foods before glancing up to look at the man behind the buffet.

"Which of your cuisine is suitable for a foreign body?"

The man only blinked at him before the frown on his face deepened.

"Hell if I know."

The Arbiter made a noise of dissatisfaction as his four-fingered hands curled more tightly around the tray.

"Then find out."

It was an unnecessary and ridiculous request on his part, but he was jaded, angry, and unreasonable at the moment. All he wanted to do was find something edible to eat, swallow it whole, and glide out of the room as if he had never been there. This incompetent child manning the mess hall buffet was of no help whatsoever.

"What did you say?"

The offended tone came from another man towards the Elite's right, and the rising level of possible threats put him on edge. He had to remember that if he pissed one off, he pissed them all off.

"I thought humans had better hearing than that, or is it a sickness of the brain that impairs you?"

Well. The Arbiter had never been one to back down from a fight.

"You're on UNSC ground now, buddy. Best be watchin' that mouth of yours, if I were you."

"It's fortunate, then, that you aren't me."

The human twitched slightly, his mouth turning down in a scowl, but didn't have enough time to get another word in because someone else interrupted their conversation.

"_Damn_. I didn't realize a Covenant bastard could be so full of snark. I think I like him, Son--... Sonya?"

Jonathan glanced to his right, then looked over his shoulder to where his brunette friend was still frozen in the same spot he had left her in.

"Get your ass over here, Sonya, and introduce me!"

The Arbiter's attention was instantly piqued at the mention of that familiar name, and he followed the blonde man's gaze to spot the female that had, in the course of about a week, become the bane of his existence.

Sonya swallowed thickly around the lump in her throat, her entire being urging her to avert her gaze, though she seemed incapable of taking her eyes off of the monstrous Elite towering over her friend.

He could kill them.

He could bend over then and there, wrap his four-fingered hands around anyone's throat, and snap their neck in two.

The image was vivid in Sonya's mind, it took everything within her to not tremble at it. Such macabre thoughts hit far too close to home, and right then she didn't really want to think about her parents, or what had happened to them. She didn't want to stare up at the Elite she would soon be tied to, and imagine his sick, smirking amusement at the death of her friends and family.

And she most certainly didn't want to 'introduce' Jonathan to her soon-to-be jailer!

The blonde seemed persistent, though, and with reluctant steps Sonya inched closer towards the two. She finally found the will to break her eyes from the Elite's piercing gaze, and trained them on the floor. The sea of men parted to make way for her, and the ongoing silence suddenly had the woman wishing for that deafening noise from earlier. At least then the awkwardness of her situation could be covered up by the buzz of everyday life.

The Elite seemed more imposing the closer she got. Of course, she'd noticed this earlier when they had first met, but had never actually stopped to let it sink in. Sonya knew she wasn't helpless, and she

refused to be overpowered by a creature she had made it her life's goal to eradicate, but there was no denying the sheer intimidation of standing so close to something capable of breaking her in half.

"Jonathan," she began, when two pairs of hoof-like feet came into her view. "This is... ah... the Arbiter."

Their brief conversation from earlier suddenly came to mind, prompting her to glance up and meet the alien's gaze.

He could kill them; that much was obviously true. Maybe not all of them, but the prominent power thrumming through his veins was not something to be taken lightly.

He could kill them...

... But he hadn't.

Whether or not that was simply because he had been ordered to remain peaceful, really didn't matter in the long run. What mattered was the fact that she was still alive, Jonathan was still alive, they were all still alive, and in the presence of a supposedly hostile Elite.

Her betrothed.

A creature as trapped by this proposal as she was.

Another realization hit her, and it was so obvious she could have smacked herself for it.

True, her life had spiraled down into an unending nightmare the day she had learned of this betrothal... but so had the Elite's. This unfortunate turn of events was a matter of higher authority. If Sonya ran away now - if she killed herself, or sought any other means of escape - the cycle of war would either perpetuate, or another victim would be found. One less competent than she. One incapable of looking at the situation in an objective manner.

She despised herself sometimes, because already she could tell she had subconsciously determined to make this thing work. It may not have been fair, or right, or pleasant, but in the very least she could work to stay alive during this hellish time.

"Arbiter, eh?"

Jonathan's genial voice broke through her thoughts, prompting her to glance in his direction.

The Elite merely nodded, throwing the human soldier a look before focusing his attention back on the woman in front of him. She seemed... different somehow. That stark timidity from earlier was still apparent, but subdued. He was curious to see how she acted in a familiar environment, surrounded by what appeared to be a close comrade.

"Why don't you eat with us?" continued the blonde, and Sonya tensed up at those words. Yes, she was determined to make the best of this situation, but that didn't mean she had any plans to get cozy with

the alien.

The Arbiter only blinked, perplexed at this odd turn of events, but didn't respond.

He didn't have to.

"Great! I'll go find us a table."

And before either party could utter a sound of protest, the up-beat soldier veered off in search of a place to sit, leaving behind two very awkward individuals.

Sonya paused, averted her eyes to her own tray which was already filled with food, then gave a resigned sigh and strode to the empty spot in the line just in front of the Arbiter. She stared at his tray for a moment, then flicked her gaze up to him before turning to look at the food.

"The Sangheili are a mostly carnivorous race, right? So your diet probably consists of--"

"_What _did you call me?"

The Arbiter had been musing inwardly at the oddity of her behavior. First cowardice, then avoidance, and now it seemed she was willing to help him, despite how strange that concept seemed. His thoughts were abruptly halted, however, when the familiar term for his kind slipped past her lips. He almost hadn't caught it, because the lilt and accent of the words was surprisingly accurate to that of his actual species, but the undeniable clumsiness of the human's tongue had given the name a foreign taste he wasn't too fond of hearing.

Sonya blinked, confused at the angry tone he had taken, and for a moment wasn't entirely sure what had offended him in the first place.

"Carnivorous?" she asked, prompting him to elaborate.

The Elite nearly growled.

"Don't be an idiot."

Affronted, the brunette gave him an incredulous look before answering his previous question.

"I called you a Sangheil--"

"Where did you hear that?"

"We have an entire file dedicated to the etymology of the Covenant's languages. Those names come up a lot, actua--"

"Don't _ever _say that word again."

She bit back the retort at the tip of her tongue, holding her justified anger in check, then turned around so her back was facing the Elite.

"Look. If you don't want my help, I'm not obligated to offer it,

okay?"

She took a step forward, moving along the metal bar directly adjacent to the buffet.

The Arbiter followed, his eyes shifting between the foreign food, and Sonya.

"I never said that."

Not that he _needed _her help, but her cooperation would definitely make his life a hell of a lot easier.

"You implied it."

TouchÃ©.

"You're certainly far more stubborn than I remember," the Elite mumbled under his breath, then nearly ran into Sonya's back when she froze on the spot.

She experienced a moment of brief contemplation, an intense desire to twirl around and slam the edge of her tray into the side of the Arbiter's head, but reasoned with herself that that would not be such a good idea.

It would be a waste of a perfectly good meal.

"Here."

She speared a piece of chicken on the end of her fork, then plopped it down on the Arbiter's tray without bothering to ask his opinion of whether or not he might like the food. She continued on, moving down the line and picking at various foods that she thought might have settled well with the alien's stomach. She wasn't an expert on their race, but she knew a little more than most people. Most soldiers knew only the basics - where an Elite's weak spots were, and how to exploit their notoriously prideful nature. 'Point and shoot' was about the most training an average soldier got on the culture and ethics of the Sanghei--

She even hesitated to _think _the word, and laughed at herself for it.

When her choice of foods seemed satisfactory, Sonya let her gaze trail around the room, trying to spot that familiar shock of sandy blonde hair.

She told herself that was the reason why she didn't dare glance at the alien standing beside her.

In reality, she was avoiding eye contact like the plague.

When she did spot Jonathan, she swore she could have _kissed _him for his choice in seating arrangements. He had found some booth set at the very back of the room, in an area that few people roamed around. They would have seclusion, and would be away from anyone's direct line of sight. The noise in the room had slowly began to rise once again, and Sonya thanked the heavens for that distraction.

"Found him," she commented briefly, then wove her way through the crowd towards her destination. Or, rather, the crowd parted like the Red Sea, because an imposing alien was trailing her every move like a shadow, but she chose to ignore that for now.

"Sonya!" her friend called as soon as she came into view, then unexpectedly greeted the Elite when the brunette settled down in the chair across from him. "Arby."

Both Sonya and the alien paused, blinking slowly.

It was the Arbiter who broke the silence.

".... Arby?"

He stood to the side of the table, glancing from the empty chair to Sonya's right, and the empty chair to the other man's left. He knew his presence unnerved the human woman, but he was on orders to spend as much time with his mate as he could, and beyond that, he knew less about this 'Jonathan' character than he knew about Sonya.

He compromised.

Gripping the chair beside Jonathan, the Arbiter pulled it around to the side of the table, and sat between the two humans in a completely neutral position.

Though she wouldn't have admitted it, Sonya was greatly relieved the Arbiter hadn't sat beside her. Jonathan noticed the politics behind this seating arrangement, and silently smirked to himself. They would get along just fine - he was sure of it.

Or, in the very least, it was unlikely that they'd actually kill each other.

... Probably.

"'Arbiter' is kind of a mouthful," he explained once everyone was settled.

Sonya snorted in a very unladylike fashion, raising an eyebrow in her friend's direction.

"It's one syllable longer, Jonathan."

He shrugged, holding his hands up in a 'I can't help how I think' fashion.

"So? I'm lazy."

"You're ridiculous, is what you are."

"Fine, fine," the blonde allowed, sweeping his hands outward in a grand motion. "But you've gotta admit, 'Arby' sounds way friendlier, and everyone deserves a nickname." And here the smile on his face grew a shade more wicked. "Isn't that right... Darbie_?"

Sonya growled, dropping the fork she had held between her fingers, and letting it fall to the tray with a clatter.

"I thought I told you to never call me that again."

"Darbie Barbie! Complete with one hooker outfit and two damned sexy legs. Pissy attitude sold separately!"

"I told you, that was a one time thing!"

The Arbiter watched on in fascination as Jonathan continued to mock his mate for some past event both had previously agreed to never mention again. The camaraderie was interesting - far less civilized than the banter between him and his brothers, but that underlying trust was still threaded deep within their conversation. They were comfortable with each other - comfortable enough to tease.

"May have been a one time thing, but I made a fortune selling those pictures to the guys on my hall."

"... You did what?"

Jonathan realized his mistake too late, and ducked his head just in time to avoid the fist flying in his direction.

Sonya, who wasn't usually so violent, settled back down in her chair after that failed attempt to inflict pain, then crossed her arms over her chest and turned her head to the side, pointedly ignoring both inhabitants sitting at the table.

"Take notes, Arby, my man," Jonathan stage-whispered, leaning towards the alien on his left. "This stage is called 'Pissy and Pouting'. You'll see a lot of this in the next few weeks. The best remedy is groveling. Lots and lots of groveling."

"I can hear you, you know," Sonya shot back over her shoulder, but still refused to turn around.

The blonde instantly turned on the theatrics, and dove from his chair to go and kneel in front of his female friend. He gripped one of her hands between both of his, and stared up at the brunette with an endearing look on his face, fake remorse etched across his features.

"Oh Sonya! Dear, sweet Sonya! Whatever have I done to offend you?" He bowed his head, touching the knuckles of her hand to his forehead. "If you can find it within yourself to forgive a poor fool his transgressions, then I will forever be indebted to you as a most humble and willing servant!"

Sonya, not missing a beat, played along with his little game. She pulled her hand free from his grip, and settled it over her left breast, as if his declaration had set her heart aflutter.

"Oh, poor nave. There is but one thing you can do to make it up to me."

Jonathan looked on eagerly, bowing his head in deference.

"Anything, my queen."

The female soldier smirked, her lips twisting upwards in a devious manner.

"Take my place."

She said it before realizing that, yes, the Arbiter was still sitting with them, and as soon as the words left her mouth, she instantly wished she could swallow them up again.

Words were like toothpaste. Once you squeezed them out, it was impossible to get them back into the tube.

Jonathan froze, instantly recognizing her slip up, and glanced up from his position kneeling on the ground to look over at the Elite, searching for some kind of reaction.

The Arbiter was skilled at schooling his features, though, and so her declaration whizzed by him without having much of an affect. So, she despised her situation as much as he? He had figured as much. If there was the possibility that someone else could have taken his place, he would have jumped that opportunity in a heartbeat. Both humans were still looking towards him for some kind of indication that he wouldn't go on a rampage from their words, so he shot back his own offhanded retort.

"I'm not interested in men."

Half of the tension that had permeated the suddenly awkward conversation went flying out the window, but that lingering reluctance still remained.

Jonathan skirted around the table and sat back down in his chair, laying both his palms flat on top of his now empty tray. There was a moment of silence, where all parties were hesitant to speak, then the Arbiter asked the question that had been on his mind for the past few minutes.

"Why 'Darbie'?"

Sonya blushed like mad about the same moment Jonathan broke out in a fit of laughter.

"I _knew _I liked you!" declared the blonde, slapping a hand against his knee.

The Arbiter remained blissfully clueless.

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"Jonathan."

"Yeah?"

"Would you mind telling me why there's an extra mound of blankets and pillows piled up on my bed?"

"... Uh... Captain's orders?"

Sonya wasn't stupid.

"Get out."

"Sonya! It wasn't my idea, I _swear._"

She whipped around to face the man still standing in the door way, her fiery amber eyes hardening to dull, flat jewels.

"Get. Out."

Jonathan was gone in an instant, the door sliding closed behind him with a comforting _shiiink_.

His hasty retreat only satisfied her for so long before reality set in.

Sonya was smart enough to realize that extra bedding materials usually meant someone was spending the night in your room, and it didn't take a genius to figure out that the ship only had _one visitor in need of a temporary place to sleep.

Utter impropriety aside, the female soldier absolutely _refused_ _to_ be stuck with an arrogant Covenant bastard contaminating her room. Who knew what kinds of diseases clung to his skin? She'd already had first-hand experience smelling his rancid breath.

(In reality, it wasn't all _that_ _bad_. She just enjoyed lying to herself, in that regard.)

The day had progressively gotten worse ever since she had woken up that morning. First, her fruitless ideas of suicide had been utterly foiled before she could even get it in her head to attempt something that stupid. Second, her lunch had been interrupted by her betrothed, and she'd had to suffer hours of scathing embarrassment by Jonathan's hands before the Arbiter had made his leave.

And now, when all she wanted to do was collapse in her bed and drift off into dreamland, it seemed she was doomed to share her living quarters with the very species of monster that gave her those nightmares that made her wake up screaming.

Honestly, Sonya couldn't shake the deep-set fear that ached through her bones every moment she spent with the Elite. As a soldier, all she wanted to do was fight everything that had been thrown her way - to scream, and rage, and _refuse_ _to_ be subjected to this kind of horror. As a victim, she wanted to run away, to escape into the inky blackness of space and never have to hear the word 'Covenant' again.

Yet, she _had_ _to_ stay.

It was her duty.

It was her obligation.

And besides, she couldn't run very far on a space ship.

Sighing in frustration, Sonya fell back on her bed and pushed the extra blankets and pillows onto the floor without a care. She spread

her arms above her, linked her fingers together, and stretched. It eased her muscles, and brought some sense of peace to her muddled mind. The sensation was relaxing, small tingles jolting through her arms and back, and for a moment she could forget about the worries of the day - forget about her betrothal, and the creature she was to be married to.

But only for a moment.

A knock sounded at her door, but it seemed far too light and calculated to have come from Jonathan.

This was it - it was him - and she knew it.

"Come in. It's unlocked."

Her voice wavered more than she would have liked, but that simply couldn't be helped. This would be the first time she had been left alone with the Arbiter ever since their initial meeting when he had first arrived, and they both knew how well that had gone. Sonya didn't want to think about her break down, though, because that was weak, and pitiful, and those weren't traits she wanted to dwell on for long.

As soon as she sat up, the door slid open, and the heavy thud, thud, thud of footsteps entered the room. The sound brought a chill to her spine, but she had already determined that she would not show that kind of weakness in front of the Arbiter again. If she had been chosen to be his mate, then she had veritably been chosen to represent the human race when standing before the Covenant, and that wasn't a job she took lightly.

Still, it took her a full two minutes to turn around and face the creature standing in the doorway.

... Which, as it turned out, wasn't a 'creature' at all.

"Ma-Master Chief!" she stuttered, surprise written all across her face.

Wait. Did that mean he was sleeping with her? Sonya paled at the thought. For some reason, it seemed far more improper for a fellow soldier to share her room than an alien.

Her worries must have shown across her face, because the imposing Spartan instantly alleviated her fears.

"I'm just here to talk."

"To... talk..." she repeated, blinking the confusion from her hazy eyes before lifting off of the bed and giving the other man her full attention.

"At ease, soldier," he said lightly, and Sonya instantly relaxed, her ramrod-straight spine slumping a bit.

After a few moments of silence, the brunette finally asked why the other man was there.

"What did you want to talk about?"

The source of their conversation was obvious.

"I'm not going to ask you if you understand your duty. I'm sure you've gotten enough of that this past week."

She had, and was relieved he wouldn't bring it up again.

He continued.

"I want to make sure you're aware of the dangers of this mission. And not just the obvious ones."

Sonya was stumped now. Dangers? Of course, she understood this wouldn't be easy, and she also knew of the... sacrifices... she would have to make in order to appease this binding contract. Just as the soldiers held hostility towards the Arbiter, she figured the Covenant would hold hostility towards her, but was assured in the idea that they wouldn't be allowed to harm her, or else their peace treaty would be nullified. So, in theory, they couldn't really do much to hurt her, unless, of course, her betrothed turned out to be abusive. She didn't get that particular vibe from him, though, so...

So. She wasn't entirely sure what the Master Chief was talking about.

She stated as much, and was a little surprised by his answer.

"I think the Prophets are up to something."

"What?"

"They've agreed to a contract that gives them no control over us. They can't be happy about that, and when the Prophets aren't happy, they do something about it."

Sonya blinked.

"So... you're telling me this whole 'betrothal' thing is just a front?"

"No."

The Master Chief sighed, then nodded once in reply to an unheard voice.

"Your mission is still legitimate, but it could be compromised. Just be on guard."

Her 'mission' could be compromised? The only thought that came to Sonya's mind was the idea that someone might seduce the Arbiter away from her, and that most certainly wouldn't have upset her. If someone wanted him, they could damned well have him!

She nodded once, then glanced to her right and stepped forward before turning her eyes back on the Spartan.

"Do you... Do you think the Arbiter is in on this?"

Master Chief paused, contemplating.

"Maybe. He isn't exactly _liked _by his comrades, from what I've seen, but... He's zealous. Hard-headed. And--"

"And he's standing right behind you."

The roughly spoken words sounded from over the Spartan's shoulder, and nearly made Sonya scream in shock. The noise was stifled by a sharp intake of breath, and the result made her cough loudly.

Both men looked her way briefly before they locked gazes once again. The Master Chief seemed unfazed, but the subtle tensing of his shoulders indicated that he was now prepared to attack should the need arise. The Arbiter just looked pissed.

"Thanks for the advice," Sonya stated shakily, quietly dismissing the soldier still standing in the doorway of her room.

He nodded once in her direction, then turned around and pushed past the Arbiter before shooting back, "Don't forget what I said," and disappearing around the corner.

And once again her doorway was overtaken with an impossibly intimidating figure.

"I was told that I would be staying in your room."

Sonya had the intense urge to ask him who had given him those orders, and then go out and punch that man in the face, but bit back the question and instead asked something far more pressing.

"How much of that did you hear?"

The Elite eyed her.

"Enough."

Shit.

That couldn't be good. She wondered if there was any way she could salvage what was said, or at least retain some sense of dignity.

"Yeah, well..."

"If they'd had any ulterior motives, they wouldn't have told me."

The admission was surprising to both parties, and made the Arbiter click his mandibles together in frustration. Why had he gone and said that? He hoped the slip-up wouldn't get him in trouble somehow, but if the girl decided to spill that information to her superiors...

"Why?"

Instead of the interrogating tone the Elite had been expecting, he instead heard only curiosity in her voice.

Still, he couldn't make another mistake.

"I see you've already made my bed," he said evenly, waving towards the pile of blankets tossed haphazardly on the floor.

Sonya blushed briefly, thinking about her childish moment of anger and how she had pushed his clean bedding onto the not-so-clean floor, but quickly shook away that feeling. She didn't ignore the fact that he had so obviously avoided a question of hers, but didn't push the subject. She was walking a thin enough line as is.

"If you want the bed, I don't mind sleeping on the floor... you know. If you want."

Alright. That had been awkward.

The Arbiter blinked once, glancing at the woman, and found her offer to be genuine. Interesting. He had already seen her in weakness, and he had witnessed her humor at lunch, but now he was being subjected to her kindness.

Wordlessly, he stepped further into the room, ignored the way the woman took a few hesitant steps back, and walked over towards the blankets, bending down to grip them loosely before straightening up to look around the room. It was of average size, about as big as the other human rooms he had seen in passing, only this one seemed bigger because there was only one bed. She had a dresser against one wall, and in the back a door that led to a private bathroom. The only floor space to make a bed big enough was on the carpet right beside the bed, and the Arbiter hesitated when he noticed this. In his mind, the farther away they were from each other, the better.

"It's okay," Sonya said, then snatched up a pillow from the floor and tossed it down beside her standard-issued cot. "Just try to wake up before me, or I might step on you..."

She was working really hard to not let her fear show. It burned the back of her throat, roiling in her stomach like vomit, and the tell-tale prick of tears threatened to spill from her dry eyes, but she fought on and ignored her body's natural reactions. Sonya was a soldier above all else, and she'd already been called weak once by the Elite. She couldn't stand to give him the opportunity to say it again.

"That is," she continued, finally turning around to face the alien. "Unless you want to sleep on the bed?"

She posed it as a question, giving him the opportunity to choose where he would crash for the next several nights.

The Arbiter flicked his wrist and draped the blanket over the carpeted area beside the bed.

"If I were to step on you, a simple bruise would be the least of your worries."

Thus was his resignation to sleep on the floor, and Sonya didn't question it again, realizing that he was absolutely right. If she stepped on him, the most damage she could inflict would be to wake him up and deprive him of a little bit of sleep. If those monstrous

hooves were to step on _her_, they would crush her much smaller form.

Thoughts of a painful demise pushed aside, Sonya was walking dead and in need of some serious sleep. The fact that an enemy from the Covenant was sharing a room with her really should have fazed her more than it did - she should have protested the proceedings until they had no choice but to acquiesce to her 'request' - but instead found the hour too late, and the point far too moot.

He would sleep and she would sleep, and that would be the end of that.

Snatching up her night clothes from her dresser, the brunette made her way into the bathroom to change, making sure to take her time so her roommate would have the opportunity to... do whatever Elite's did in preparation for sleep.

After brushing her teeth, combing out the tangles in her hair, and splashing some cold water on her face, Sonya stepped back inside the main room and found the Arbiter exactly how she had left him: fully armored, and standing in the dead center of her room.

"Uh..." she began eloquently, then waved helplessly towards the bathroom door. "You can change in there, if you need to..."

"I will make do."

That was man-speak for 'I'm sleeping in my armor'.

Sonya frowned, her brow furrowing in confusion. Did he think she would try to attack him in the middle of the night? That would explain his need to be constantly prepared for a fight, even while resting. But, then again, maybe he was just ridiculously modest? Alien or no, she'd seen the male anatomy a million times over, and though her own personal embarrassment gave her reason to blush on more than one occasion, matters of the human body did not.

As if to prove this point to herself, she openly eyed the Elite standing in her room, letting her gaze trail from his thick, arching neck, down across his broad chest and muscled arms, following the tapered path his stomach and abdomen made as his body connected with long, lean legs...

And promptly blushed.

Holy shit.

That was _not_ _good_.

Tearing her eyes away from the other inhabitant of the room, Sonya walked swiftly towards her bed and dove beneath the covers in an almost frantic manner.

"Turn out the lights when you're done," she mumbled, then twisted around so her back was facing the Elite, and curled in on herself.

She did _not_ _just_... There was _no way_ she had thought...

There was a word for what had just ran through her head.

Xenophilia.

Those were waters she simply wasn't prepared to tread.

The Arbiter, for his part, didn't notice his mate-to-be's inner turmoil, and only gave her a cursory glance before running a hand along his armor. It wasn't that he was particularly _modest _on the woman's behalf - years spent in an army that shared communal showers did that to a person - but the heretic mark still ached against his flesh every time he thought of it, and he simply wasn't prepared to let that shameful part of himself be known. She would have questions, and he wouldn't be willing to give answers.

He braved the promise of uncomfortable soreness for the next day, and laid down on top of the blanket strewn across the floor. Stretched out, his legs nearly touched the far wall housing the bathroom on the other side. The space was cramped, tight, and he doubted he would get much rest that night.

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His doubts were soon realized a few hours later.

The Arbiter had woken to screaming before, but the sound usually came from his own lungs. Nightmares of his horrendous ordeal, of the suffering he had went through in order for that cursed mark to be burned into his skin, often plagued his dreams and tore him from unconsciousness in the most unholy of manners.

This time, though, the shouts were of a higher pitch.

He shot straight up from his makeshift bed, instantly alert and aware. His hand flew to his hip, gripping the empty air where his energy blade had been (They had relieved him of his weapons after he had found out he would be staying on the human ship until further notice.) and, finding that useless, fell into a defensive crouch. Weaponless or not, the Arbiter was still a force to be reckoned with; all muscle, and pride, and force of will.

Whoever _dared _to attack them would soon find themselves wishing they hadn't been so stupid. He would make sure of it.

It was difficult, though, to fight an enemy of the head.

It didn't take long for the Arbiter to realize the noise was coming from Sonya. His gaze shifted towards the bed, and slowly - ever so slowly - his tense muscles began to relax. The human female was trapped beneath the bedsheets, the covers twisted up in her legs, and she struggled against them like they were a binding enemy. The shriek of terror that wrenched past her lips was something wrought of true horror, the kind of noise only a wraith could make, or a deeply tormented being.

The sound was piercing, and more than just a little annoying.

Dropping his unarmed hand to his side, the Arbiter stared down at Sonya for a few more minutes before making his way to the side of her bed. She probably wouldn't appreciate being woken up by the likes of him, but he wasn't about to suffer another minute of that raucous racket.

One long fingered hand reached down to shake her awake, but he soon found himself the subject of a mindless attack. Sonya was just as unconscious as before, but her frightened body felt the need to lash out at whatever was touching her, despite her mind's senselessness. The Arbiter barely had time to duck out of the way as a fist went flying towards his skull. His grip on her shoulder tightened out of reflex, and the brunette yelped at the sensation, struggling to fight him off.

"Wake up," spoke the Elite gruffly, hoping his voice would stir her, but having no such luck. If anything, the woman's struggles increased.

She jerked to her left, then twisted her body around to try and thrust her foot at the alien's hip. He stepped forward so her heel missed his skin and hooked behind his leg instead, and was just about to pull away when the female soldier used that leverage to jerk the Elite off balance. He stumbled for half a moment before his knees collided with the edge of the bed and he fell forward.

Right on top of Sonya.

All hell broke loose.

The brunette let out an unholy shriek of terror, her limbs jerking back to get as far away from this sudden intrusion as possible, but at least the mishap had one positive outcome.

Sonya woke up.

Sonya woke up with the uncanny inability to breathe correctly, because something was crushing her into the mattress.

Sonya woke up with the face of what had been plaguing her nightmares hovering just above her head.

And, most importantly, Sonya woke up in an undeniably provocative position; legs tangled with gangly, alien limbs; arms pinned to her sides as the weight of a large, though lean, body pressed down into her.

She choked back the scream already halfway out her mouth, then clamped her lips together and stared up at the Elite with wide, frightened eyes. She had been ignoring her fear all day, had suppressed that horrified part of her in a manner that almost had her proud of her accomplishments, but this - this - she could not press to the back of her mind. It was every fear realized, every terror drudged up from her psyche to taunt and tease her. The despicable, grinning face of the Elite in her dream blended with the shocked stare on the Arbiter's own features. They faded in and out of one another, making it difficult for Sonya to determine which was a

dream, and which was real.

It physically pained her to look up at that image, and in a helpless gesture, the woman clenched her eyes closed and tossed her head to the side, trying to bury her face in the pillow she lay on. Every thought centered on a single mantra: Make it go away, make it go away, make it go away! She didn't know who or what would help make it go away - hell, her thoughts were too jumbled up to determine exactly what 'it' was - but she knew that she did not like her current position, and she'd give just about anything to get out of that predicament.

"Get off," she finally croaked out, her voice trembling.
"Please."

The last was said in a tone barely above a whisper.

This was simply too much for her troubled mind to take at the moment.

Thankfully, the Arbiter lifted up as soon as she spoke. He had been frozen in shock before, but her desperate plea had knocked his senses right back into him, and so with careful movements he untangled his limbs from hers and shifted away from the quaking woman below him.

Pathetic.

He wasn't sure what raced through his heart at that moment, but he was almost certain it was disgust. What other emotion could make his abdomen clench with the searing want to shake the woman; to hold her close and rock the trembling right out of her?

(Denial was more than just a river in Egypt, as the saying went.)

He felt obligated to ask after her well-being.

"Are you alright?"

She wasn't, but there was no way in hell she would admit that.

"Fine," she answered instead, mumbling almost to herself, then grabbed the tangled sheets and smoothed them out once again. She could feel the Arbiter's eyes on her, and shivered at the sensation. Goose flesh rose along her arms, little bumps to remind her of her fear, though that burning lump in her throat hinted at an entirely different emotion.

He had been laying flush against her, after all. Close enough to feel his breath ghost across her neck, the surprisingly soft skin of his hands brush along her wrists, and his broad-shouldered body press most intimately against her feminine curves...

No.

She stopped that thought dead in its tracks. It wouldn't do to indulge in freakish fetishes, and feeling anything but hate for the monster she was currently sharing her room with would be nothing short of weird.

With her back once again facing the Elite, Sonya finally had a few moments to collect herself. Tears of fright threatened to spill from her eyes, but she held them in most valiantly. When the room was once again plunged into silence, she could almost believe she was there alone, but the Arbiter's voice shattered that illusion.

"Don't lie to me."

He sounded frustrated, and Sonya thought he didn't even have the right to sound so angry in front of her. Not after the little incident he had just caused.

"Shu'up," she slurred drowsily, wishing he would just go away and leave her alone.

"What is the matter, human?" he pressed, his voice holding that underlying hint of concern that men were so skilled in masking. That tone surprised Sonya, prompting her to toss a quick glance over her shoulder, blinking the sleep from her eyes.

"It's nothing," she offered unwillingly, and was about to snuggle down into her covers when a large, four-fingered hand gripped her shoulder and forced her to face her roommate.

"If it was nothing, you wouldn't be on the verge of tears." His cold eyes seemed to peer into her very soul, and Sonya squirmed under that gaze. "Now tell me. What is wrong?"

Truly, the Arbiter wasn't exactly sure why he even bothered to get any answers out of the woman. For curiosity's sake, he kept telling himself, but even then he needn't be so gentle with the girl.

Practice, his mind supplied. For the future to come. And he was satisfied with that.

Sonya, on the other hand, was far from pleased with this turn of events. It confused her, and more than anything she just wanted to be left alone. She could not show weakness. She had determined that in her own head earlier, and now the idea had concreted itself in her mind, latching onto her beliefs and refusing to let go.

Instead of answering, she merely turned her head into the pillow once again, shying away from the glowering alien face above her.

The Arbiter growled softly beneath his breath, then shook the woman lightly.

"You aren't making this easy."

"Who said it was supposed to be easy?" she mumbled, flicking her eyes towards him.

"No one said it was supposed to be hard."

But they both had known getting along wouldn't come naturally. Everything about their 'relationship' was unnatural, foreign, and it would take a lot of work just to be able to tolerate each other, let alone coexist.

It didn't matter what anyone said; the whole betrothal was a joke. They would end up killing themselves or killing each other before it was all said and done.

There was really nothing he could say that could possibly console her, and so, with a lack of options to explore, the Arbiter released his hold on the woman and took a few steps back, allowing her the personal space she so desperately needed. Her problems weren't his own - at least, not until the ceremonies had taken place, and those wouldn't occur for another few days at least.

In less than a week, they would both be tied to each other by inseparable bonds, and this would be a nightly occurrence.

He only barely grasped the hint of what sort of situation he had gotten himself into, but he wasn't too keen on exploring his 'feelings' in regard to his mate.

Perhaps it would be best if they kept up the kind of existence they were perpetuating now? Ignoring each other seemed to be a pretty handy tool in dealing with the other's presence.

Their 'duties', however, could not be ignored, and it would be difficult to forget someone's presence while performing the Sacred Acts with them.

The Arbiter sighed to himself, agitated that his train of thought had once again fallen in that direction. The night was still young, though, so he still had time to fill his thoughts with other things - images of his homeland, and of his brethren, and of everything he had left behind.

Because, in less than a week, he would take the ultimate plunge away from his heritage. From hero, to heretic, to betrothed.

In less than a week, he would truly be the lowest of the low; nothing but a mate to a monkey.

Yes. He had a lot to think about, indeed.

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><p>To Be Continued...

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><p>Next chapter due around May 30th, 2009.

*mon petit cochon = My little pig

End
file.